

Université de Montréal

A Bildungsroman-Testimonial Narrative from the Margins:
Subjection, Self-Cultivation, and Subversion in Jimmy Santiago Baca's
A Place to Stand

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Ce mémoire intitulé:
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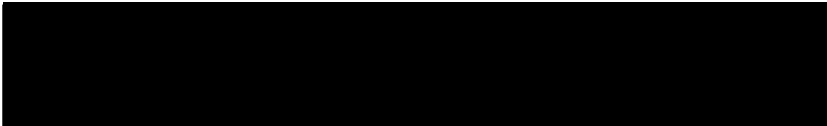
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Membre du jury

Résumé de synthèse

A Place to Stand, par Jimmy Santiago Baca, est un bildungsroman et, à fois, une narration. *A Place to Stand* raconte la vie de Baca: enfant abandonné, ses années en orphelinat, puis son adolescence passée dans la rue, et la transformation qu'il subit en prison. L'histoire de Baca rentre dans le cadre du genre du bildungsroman, car elle est à la fois roman de développement personnel et d'auto-cultivation. Cependant, *A Place to Stand*, ajoute à cette tradition littéraire de plusieurs façons. La marginalité raciale et sociale que subit Baca doit être comprise et éventuellement confrontée par lui-même, afin qu'il puisse développer une identité positive et se cultiver. En introduisant dans le bildungsroman des thèmes tels le racisme, la stigmatisation et la criminalisation, la tradition s'en trouve élargie. De plus, *A Place to Stand* rentre de même dans le genre de la narration, s'agissant de la reddition des événements vécus par une personne face à une société intolérante et cruelle. L'œuvre de Baca est subversive par nature: elle défie le préjudice, l'étiquetage simpliste, et la fausse promesse du Rêve Américain.

Bildungsroman, Marginalité, Littéraire Chicano, Postcolonial, Roman de narration

Abstract

Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand* is both a bildungsroman and a testimonial narrative. *A Place to Stand* depicts Baca's life as an abandoned child, his time in an orphanage and on the streets as a teen, and the transformation that Baca experiences in prison. Baca's story easily fits within the bildungsroman genre, for it is a novel of growth and self-cultivation. *A Place to Stand*, however, adds to this literary tradition in several ways. Baca's racial and social marginality must be understood and eventually challenged by Baca in order for him to develop a positive identity and cultivate himself. By introducing issues such as racism, stigma, and criminalization into the bildungsroman, the tradition is enlarged. Moreover, *A Place to Stand* crosses over into the testimonial narrative genre, for it is the true account of one person's experiences with an intolerant and cruel society. Baca's work is subversive in nature: challenging prejudice, simplistic labeling, and the false promise of the American Dream. In *A Bildungsroman-Testimonial Narrative from the Margins: Subordination, Self-Cultivation, and Subversion in Jimmy Santiago Baca's A Place to Stand*, I will examine Baca's initial negative self-construction, his education and self-cultivation, and his subversive manner of writing.

Bildungsroman, Marginalization, Chicano Literature, Postcolonial, Testimonial Narrative

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A Note on Grammar

The gendered pronoun has been an issue for me ever since I began writing essays. I find using “him/her” too long, and it draws my attention away from the main point. I tried using “them” in past essays but discarded this approach because it’s grammatically incorrect. I prefer not to use solely “him” or “her,” for it automatically excludes one gender.

I have attempted to remedy this issue by alternating between using “him” and “her” in this thesis. I hope that this approach will be acceptable for this thesis and, more importantly, a smoother approach for how to use gendered pronouns will be discovered in the future.

General Introduction

Preliminary Remarks

Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand* is both a bildungsroman and a testimonial narrative that depicts Baca's life as an abandoned child, his time in an orphanage and on the streets as a teen, and the transformation that Baca experiences in prison. Baca's work easily fits within the bildungsroman genre, for it is a story of growth and self-cultivation. *A Place to Stand*, however, adds to this genre in several ways. Baca contributes to this European literary tradition by introducing issues of racial and social marginalization in his bildungsroman. Moreover, *A Place to Stand* crosses over into the testimonial narrative genre, for it is the true account of one person's experiences with an intolerant and bigoted society. Baca's testimonial narrative seeks to do even more than describe the protagonist's self-development. By challenging prejudice, simplistic labeling, and the false promise of the American Dream, Baca's work is subversive in nature. In *A Bildungsroman-Testimonial Narrative from the Margins: Subordination, Self-Cultivation, and Subversion in Jimmy Santiago Baca's A Place to Stand*, I examine Baca's initial negative self-construction, his education and self-cultivation, and the subversive nature of his work.

Contribution to the Literary Field of Study

In writing *A Bildungsroman-Testimonial Narrative from the Margins: Subordination, Self-Cultivation, and Subversion in Jimmy Santiago Baca's A Place to Stand*, I have sought to write an innovative thesis that would add to the field of Chicano Studies, testimonial narratives, and research on Baca. I hope that

this thesis adds to the knowledge of Baca's writing in the field of literary studies: Baca is an important writer who should be read and studied. Baca has not only contributed to literature through his beautiful and poignant prose, his thoughtful exploration of marginalization is needed in today's troubled society. Baca's depiction of inequity raises difficult questions that should be addressed inside and outside the academy.

Baca is not only one of the most talented writers in the United States today, his experiences in prison have motivated him to help others who are incarcerated. Baca has satellite literacy programs funded by the U.S. Justice Department in detention centers and prisons all over the country, and in the state of New Mexico, Baca has been granted free access to any prison in order to establish literacy programs. In fact, Baca regularly gives talks and readings all over the country in order to discuss literacy issues, marginalization, and prejudice. At present, he is making a documentary on prisons, literacy, and the power of books. Baca has contributed to society not only through his extraordinary writing but also through his work to improve prison conditions.

I have strived to contribute a new way of examining the bildungsroman in this thesis by highlighting how race, class, and stigmatization affect the bildungsroman protagonist's struggle for self-cultivation. While other writers have also used the bildungsroman genre to discuss marginalization issues, I have attempted to show how including testimonial narratives as an extension of the bildungsroman may add to this tradition by presenting real-life subversive anecdotes. Baca's testimonial narrative introduces challenging topics that are

crucial to understanding modern society's conflicts and struggles. In essence, Baca inserts his testimonial narrative into the long tradition of the bildungsroman genre, and in doing so, expands how this genre has traditionally been perceived.

I have chosen to focus on Baca's work, the bildungsroman, and the subversive testimonial narrative because I believe that there is a vital need for self- and social cultivation in today's world. Through personal reflection, an individual may define herself in a positive, productive manner. By understanding and challenging societal stigmatization, prejudice, and injustice, a person may individually and collectively work to change these inequities. Thus, self-cultivation and a desire to subvert unjust practices can powerfully impact the individual and her society. Literature can play a central role in helping a person to examine herself and the society in which she lives. *A Place to Stand* beautifully chronicles Baca's desire to better himself as an individual and to contribute to society in a meaningful and transgressive way. In writing this thesis, I hope to honor an individual whose talent, courage, integrity, and actions have certainly made a lasting impact on me.

Bildungsroman Tradition

The bildungsroman genre examines the education and growth of the novel's protagonist. In its purest form, this literary tradition has been defined as a novel of "'all-around development or self culture' with 'a . . . conscious attempt by the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experiences'" (Buckley 13). The bildungsroman contains a variety of conventions that distinguish it from other genres. Jerome Buckley notes that traditionally the hero

has been male, who is orphaned or has a troubled relationship with his father, who is typically portrayed as hostile to his son's creativity and studies. (17) Often the protagonist feels suffocated not only by his father but by the provincial area in which he has been raised, creating a conflict between the bildungsroman-self and society. In order for the artist to pursue his goals, therefore, he must free himself of the social and cultural demands which have been imposed upon him by his community (Beebe 5). Jerome Buckley argues that lacking a positive role model to emulate actually helps stimulate the hero's growth, for the protagonist is motivated to become independent and develop a positive, strong identity to counteract his difficult childhood (18).

One manner in which the protagonist seeks to cultivate himself is by leaving his community (Beebe 6). Usually, the hero heads to an urban center, where, he idealistically believes, his life will improve significantly. In fact, experiences in the city are not always positive for the protagonist, but this is not to say that they are not ultimately beneficial. The hero often makes many unwise choices that leave him misguided and floundering. These missteps are an essential aspect of the rite of passage that will allow the individual to cultivate himself. Indeed, Beebe asserts that the hero must be tested until only his true self is evident (5). Buckley further notes,

each of these young men experiences privileged moments of insight, epiphanies, spots of time when the reality of things break through the fog of delusion. And each then feels a responsibility for a change of heart and conduct. For each is what we should now call 'inner-directed'. . . . (22, 23)

Thus, the protagonist's education often does not occur in an institution and encompasses more than just intellectual development.

Although the bildungsroman focuses primarily on an individual's transformation, it is significant to note that a crucial aspect of the hero's self-cultivation occurs through his interactions with others. Bonnie Hoover Braendlin believes that the interest in the bildungsroman genre relates to the examination of "interpersonal relationships that figure prominently in the formation of personality"(qtd in Koshigian 29). The individual, therefore, needs to partake in social interactions and relationships in order to further his growth and self-awareness. Some scholars believe the bildungsroman is "the story of the formation of a character up to the moment when he ceases to be self-centered and becomes society-centered, thus, beginning to shape his true self" (Kontje 69). Self-discovery, then, signifies more than developing an individual identity. The reader intuitively feels that being a better spouse, parent, friend, and community member is a crucial aspect of the hero's ability to cultivate himself. Although the bildungsroman focuses on the individual, outside social relationships are necessary for the hero to develop his identity and attain his goals.

Along with developing positive social relationships, the protagonist must accept and utilize his own agency. Berman notes that the improvement and progress of the hero is "not arbitrary or chaotic change but rather teleological development" (78). This suggests that the protagonist does not *stumble* on to inner-directedness but rather chooses to work consciously and effectively on bettering himself (78). Other scholars have also argued for the necessity of the individual to actively pursue his goals. Martin Swales notes that "at any given moment an individual has many potential options, but as time goes on only a

limited number of these experiences can be pursued” (quoted in Kontje 74).

Johanne von Goethe, the German Romantic writer, notes that “all capacity is inborn but must be cultivated” (quoted in Kontje 36). For self-cultivation and artistic talent to develop, the hero must take an active stance in his own life.

The issue of how the bildungsroman might fit in a modern epoch is worthy of exploration. Interestingly, the bildungsroman was most popular before World War I. In *Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukacs argues,

Homer . . . was able to present a unified world in his epics of antiquity because the world was still whole . . . in contrast the experience of modernity entails disruption, confusion and alienation: the freedom we gained is paid for with metaphysical homelessness. (84)

The tidy, although not always happy, pre-modern world of the earlier bildungsroman no longer exists in this modern era. Whereas previously the hero had limited choices available to him, he is now deluged with many options, which create disruption and alienation. In fact, modernity also has an effect on how individuals choose to explore issues of identity. Berman states that “modernism ignites a crisis of individuality” (84). This suggests perhaps that while the organized world of the earlier bildungsroman may no longer exist in our present time, the search for a positive individual identity, which is at the heart of the bildungsroman genre, may be of particular value and even urgency in modern times.

Many theorists argue that the bildungsroman performs a valuable role in society. Karl Morgenstern, for instance, suggests that “a work will be classed a *Bildungsroman* first and primarily on account of its content, because it depicts the hero’s *Bildung*... but also secondarily, because, precisely by means of this

depiction, it promotes the *Bildung* of the reader to a greater extent than any other type of novel” (qtd in Berman 77). The bildungsroman genre, then, has a positive impact on the reader and her society. In fact, Berman further states that the bildungsroman is “an exploration of how the hero—and perhaps the reader—might learn to think independently” (78).

Some bildungsroman scholars further suggest that the bildungsroman may not only help the reader develop her bildung but also help the society as a whole cultivate itself. Berman believes that the bildungsroman may help the reader find remedies to societal conflicts. He states, “. . . internal life is deepened and enriched, which . . . is the vehicle with which social tensions, conflicts among individual with inimical private interests may be overcome” (77). Moreover, Koshigian links personal and national identity together in her study of the Spanish-American bildungsroman. She posits that “the prospect of self-realization and identity should be measured metonymically. As the person grows, so does the nation, feeling similar growing pains and struggles with the rite of passage as the individual” (17). Koshigian argues that “innocuous behavior can have profound consequences of the shape of social order and can unravel strategies of domination” (103). The bildungsroman is not solely a novel about an individual’s self-cultivation; it may have the power to affect the reader’s and nation’s development as well.

Above, the bildungsroman is discussed primarily in terms of fiction. Some theorists, however, have suggested that “testimonial narratives” may also be included in the bildungsroman genre because these narratives are constructed on a

foundation of self-definition (Koshigian 146). Here, the testimonial narrative represents issues of justice and social change in the society at large by depicting larger historical conflicts of a particular community. The hero's self-cultivation symbolizes the collective cultivation of the character's group. The protagonist, then, represents the group; his success also symbolizes the success of his group. Koshigian argues that testimonial narratives are the product of a marginalized group's need for narration based on experiences of exploitation, violence, marginality, and poverty. (146) A brutal questioning of self, in essence, allows the group to grapple with its inner conflicts and develop group enlightenment (147).

The Testimonial Narrative Tradition

Traditionally, the bildungsroman is categorized as a work of fiction; the testimonial narrative, however, is not a work of fiction. The claim that testimonial narratives may have a place in the bildungsroman genre raises the issue of exactly what is a testimonial narrative and how this genre might fit within and add to the bildungsroman tradition. Silbey and Ewing note that certain criteria must be present in order for us to define a work as a testimonial narrative. For instance, the testimonial narrative must be constructed using the specific past events the storyteller selects to relate. (Silbey 201) By choosing some aspects and omitting others, the narrator is making value judgments about what is important and what is not. In this manner, the narrator is already creating a lens through which her audience will view the text.

Another essential component of a personal narrative is that it is temporally ordered with a beginning, middle, and end. Here, Hayden White draws significant distinctions between testimonial narratives and non-narratives such as annals and chronicles. While annals list events in chronological order, they do not have a plot or closure, which is a key feature of the personal narrative. Chronicles also do not have closure; they simply end in the present. Thus, neither annals nor chronicles provide “the summing up of the meaning of the chain of events with which it deals” (Silbey 201). White establishes the importance of closure, when he states that “the demand for closure is a demand . . . for moral meaning” (Silbey 201). Thus, unlike chronicles or annals, testimonial narratives are meant to provide meaning. Viewed in relation to the bildungsroman genre, the personal narrative seeks to enlighten the bildung of the narrator and perhaps the reader as well. Lastly, the events and characters of a testimonial narrative are related to each other in some manner. Often the testimonial narrative is organized around opposition or struggle (Silbey 200). According to Silbey and Ewing, structuring events results in both “narrative closure” and “narrative causality” which in turn explains how and why the events mentioned occurred. (200) This, in turn, leads the reader to reflect upon and find moral meaning in the personal narrative.

Similar to the bildungsroman, the testimonial narrative may be an invaluable way for the individual to define herself. Some theorists note that stories people tell about their lives “constitute and interpret those lives” (Silbey 199). Psychologist Polkinghorne suggests, in fact, that one way psychotherapy may assist patients is by providing them the opportunity to construct a “meaning-

giving narrative of self-identity” (Silbey 199). In some cases, personal narratives may help an individual claim a different identity for himself in place of the one imposed on him by society. Sociologist Bell claims that “a central, if not *the* central concern underlying narrative studies . . . is to give voice to the subject . . . to preserve this voice of the subject” (qtd in Silbey 245). Thus, narrativizing may allow the individual to cultivate himself.

Subversive Testimonial Narratives

Silbey and Ewing note that there are two forms of testimonial narratives: those that support hegemony and those that subvert hegemony. Subversive testimonial narratives have several components that differ from testimonial narratives that support hegemony. Silbey and Ewing posit that one aspect of a subversive story is the social marginality of the narrator since his marginality will most likely prevent his experiences and beliefs from being the “norm” in dominant society. The narrator could also be someone from the dominant culture who has built a kinship with and a deep awareness of a marginal culture (220).¹

A second component of subversive stories is “understanding *how* the hegemonic is constituted . . . In other words, knowing the rules and perceiving a concealed agenda enhance the possibilities of intervention and resistance” (Silbey 220). By knowing the rules and beliefs of dominant culture, the author is able to resist and subvert power more effectively by highlighting the weak areas or unfair practices of those in power. A third condition for creating subversive texts is the discovery of common content in the testimonial narrative “revealing the collective

organization of personal life” (220). An example of this is the phenomena of the Feminist Consciousness-raising groups in the Sixties. Through narration, white middle class women found commonness in their personal narratives, which allowed them to see that there was a similar pattern present in their oppression. This enabled the women to realize that their subordination was not “their fault” as many had previously assumed. Many women then began to question the inequitable structures that they had previously perceived as “normal.”

For those born in the margins, then, subversive testimonial narratives may provide an invaluable tool for challenging often unquestioned societal perceptions. Many academics have argued that subversive testimonial narratives help rewrite “social life in ways that are, or can be liberatory” (Silbey 199), for they are capable of revealing “truths about the social word that are flattened or silenced . . .” (199). Moreover, subversive testimonial narratives may challenge power dynamics, by undermining “the illusion of an objective naturalized world which so often sustains inequality and powerlessness” (Silbey 199).

In fact, transgressive personal narratives can extend the significance and impact of a resistant act. Silbey and Ewing note that

A chief means for extending the social consequences of resistance . . . is through the transformation of an act of resistance, into a story of resistance, a story that by its telling extends temporally and socially what might otherwise be a discrete or ephemeral victory. (1332)

In this manner, testimonial narratives may be subversive in their ability to extend the significance of a resistant act.

Understanding power dynamics may help us to understand how a story about a subversive act can extend the significance of what might otherwise be a

short-lived triumph. Foucault notes that power is employed, not “owned,” by select persons (98). In essence, power is not “given” to certain individuals. Those in authority must access and use power in order to possess it (98). Silbey and Ewing note that subordinate and superordinate identities must be performed regularly in order to establish power. Thus, power is not a privilege; it is acquired. Silbey and Ewing describe power in a manner that mirrors Judith Butler’s concept of performativity. Power is performed on and over subordinate individuals, and with each repetitive act of compliance, the subordinate reinforces the power of the superordinate. (1333) Ironically, the subordinate is often unaware of how significant a role she plays in reinforcing the power of the superordinate.

Power is often so accepted, and even buried that power transactions appear to be invisible, to the degree that acting in a different, less docile manner is not even considered. To many, it appears that no person or structure is demanding obedience, and, thus, those in a subordinate position are not behaving in a compliant manner (Silbey 1334). The subordinates’ contribution to the power of the superordinate is also at the center of their ability to resist, for without compliance from subordinates, the power source of the superordinate is disrupted. Silbey argues that “because the successful exercise of power is contingent upon a performance by the subordinate party, power is intrinsically linked to the possibilities of resistance” (1333). Thus, power is dependent upon the docility of the subordinate person: just as a subordinate can legitimate those in authority by acquiescing to their power, the subordinate may also resist authority by repetitively challenging, openly or not, the power of those in charge (1334).

Subversive testimonial narratives may play a powerful role in resistance through disruption of power performances and exposing previously hidden power dynamics. Silbey and Ewing argue that narrativizing a small act of resistance becomes sociologically consequential. The act of telling a subversive story to an audience allows “the consciousness of the apparently unthinkable (Silbey 1334)” to occur. This is particularly significant since the invisibility of power is often a crucial component of subordinates’ willingness to acquiesce in power transactions. The power of thinking the unthinkable such as considering new, less docile ways of behaving is underscored when Silbey and Ewing state, “If hegemony refers to that which is unthinkable, resistance must depend at some point in thinking the unthinkable”(1328). Where previously a resistant, unthinkable act might be effective but ephemeral, a subversive testimonial narrative promotes greater resistance. Through the telling of the story, the unthinkable act is now shared with a group of people. Storytelling allows the audience to conceive of new ways of handling power transactions in what previously might have been an unthinkable manner. Silbey notes that “the possibility of escalation and transformation is accomplished primarily through the collective construction of the story” (1346).

Not only do personal narratives allow the audience and the narrator to think the unthinkable, social structures that were previously taken for granted may be revealed in a testimonial narrative of resistance. The stories, therefore, expose inequitable situations that have previously been accepted as “normal” (Silbey 1329). This heightened awareness of the authoritative structures that create

inequity are at the heart of resistance: “Resistance does not . . . seize upon lapses of power so much as it relies on the . . . familiarity with a particular social organization...individuals identify the cracks and vulnerabilities of institutionalized power . . .” (Silbey 1330). Testimonial narratives may be a powerful way to discover these cracks and vulnerabilities of a power source, which, in turn, allows the individuals to resist in a more strategic and effective manner.

While a story may provide insight into a power structure’s fallibility, it is the act of *telling* the story that increases the ability to confront and subvert authority, for the audience is as important to the narrative of resistance as the narrator. Through engagement with the story, the audience struggles to interpret why certain events in the testimonial narrative occur. In this manner, the story transcends the personal and individual by creating an atmosphere where the audience vicariously participates in the narrator’s act of resistance. The personal narrative ceases to be solely the narrator’s story and becomes a collective construction of the resistant act (Silbey 1346). By hearing one person’s narrative of resisting dominant authority, others may be inspired to emulate the narrator’s actions. Even more significantly, an audience member’s mentality may be altered as a result of engagement with the subversive testimonial narrative. Where before the individual might not have questioned authority or even recognized its presence, the person may come to see that what was previously assumed to be “normal” or “the way things are” is now no longer the case after participating in the storytelling.

Even when an individual reads a testimonial narrative that depicts life experiences different from her own, there is still an ability to connect with the subversive message in the story by establishing a level of commonality between the reader and the storyteller. Goffman wisely notes that “The most fortunate of normals is likely to have his half-hidden failings Hence persons with only a minor differentness find they understand the structure of the situation in which the fully stigmatized are placed” (127). The reader, then, is able to find commonality with the narrator through compassion and limited shared experience. An individual may identify with a prison narrative, Holocaust story, or any account that describes injustice, regardless of whether she has personally experienced the situations described in the story.

Bildungsroman and Testimonial Narratives

Based on the characteristics of bildungsromane and testimonial narratives, it is clear how these two traditions complement and expand upon each other. Just as the testimonial narrative must have a beginning, middle and end with a particular emphasis on closure, the bildungsroman depicts the protagonist at the beginning of the novel, delineates the awkward growth the hero achieves after leaving his community in the middle, and ends with the character cultivating himself. Thus, for both personal narratives and bildungsromans, closure and moral meaning are essential aspects of these traditions. In the bildungsroman and testimonial narrative traditions, both narrator and audience play a crucial role. Therefore, both will be changed through the telling of the story. In essence, the

bildung of the protagonist and reader may be cultivated by the end of the testimonial narrative or bildungsroman.

There is also a clear link between Spanish-American bildungsromans (or any bildungsromans that depict characters from the margins of society) and testimonial narratives. Both depict not only the growth of the main character but also show the collective growth of a group or country. In fact, many of the bildungsromans and testimonial narratives that have central characters from the margins will most likely be subversive in nature, if only by challenging the belief that there is one truth, one manner of living.

The testimonial narrative not only possesses many similarities to the bildungsroman genre, it may enlarge this literary tradition when it is subversive in nature. While the bildungsroman is a work of fiction, the testimonial narrative is based on true accounts. The bildungsroman also focuses primarily on the individual, even though the protagonist's cultivation includes developing positive social relations with others. The transgressive testimonial narrative, on the other hand, often concentrates on the individual as well as the group, society, and nation of the individual. In fact, a subversive testimonial narrative helps combat the hegemony of a given culture by questioning practices that have been taken for granted and even made invisible. The narrative of resistance, therefore, may challenge the dominant order and help create change on a societal or national level rather than solely improving the protagonist's bildung.

A Place to Stand—A Bildungsroman-Testimonial Narrative

Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand* is a fascinating blend of the bildungsroman and testimonial narrative traditions. In many ways, Baca's work fits within the traditional bildungsroman format. Like many other bildungsroman heroes, Baca experiences a painful childhood. His father, faced with intense and humiliating racism, becomes an alcoholic, who regularly beats his wife. Baca's mother chooses to deal with racist society by denying her heritage and shaming Baca and his siblings for not being "more white." At a young age, Baca is abandoned by both parents, essentially making him an orphan. In fact, due to his grandfather's death and grandmother's poor health, Baca and his brother are sent to an orphanage where they are regularly beaten and abused. Baca eventually escapes and lives on the streets, where he is labeled a "deviant" and troublemaker. It is not until Baca was sent to prison, however, that his education and self cultivation becomes a reality.

In prison, Baca fine-tunes his survival skills, an education that later allows him to learn how to become literate and to cultivate himself. Through writing, Baca begins to face the pain of his childhood, allowing him to heal from past wounds. Even more significantly, Baca begins to see himself as a poet rather than center his identity on the label "convict." In this manner, Baca is able to develop a positive self-identity, which eventually helps him to become a better man, husband, father, and community member.

Baca's story also diverges from the traditional bildungsroman format. In many ways, it naturally becomes a subversive testimonial narrative simply due to

the subject matter he addresses in *A Place to Stand*. Like many narrators of subversive narratives, Baca comes from the margins. Not only is he Chicano, he is raised in poverty and lives the “street life” before entering prison. All of these factors guarantee that his testimonial narrative does not describe experiences prevalent in dominant society. Baca must examine marginalization issues such as internalized racism, inequitable societal precepts, stigma, and criminalization before he can achieve self-cultivation. Moreover, Baca’s depiction of his experiences in the dominant culture clearly delineate the rules and weak spots of the society. His commentary on prejudice, labeling and society allows his work to not only describe a time in U.S. history, his work challenges the beliefs and actions of the dominant group. Lastly, Baca’s narrative builds on a commonality of experience with his audience. While many readers may not have experienced the level of oppression Baca faces, they are able to connect with the injustice he suffers, a crucial aspect of a transgressive story. In this manner, racism, prejudice, labeling, and criminalization stop being an anonymous individual’s problem and resonate with the society at large, making Baca’s work movingly and effectively subversive.

Thesis Chapter Overview

A Bildungsroman-Testimonial Narrative from the Margins:

Subordination, Self-Cultivation, and Subversion in Jimmy Santiago Baca’s A Place to Stand will explore three specific areas of Baca’s work. Chapter One will examine Baca’s initial racial and social identities. These initial identities are

formed by society's negative views of race, class, and dysfunctional families. Experiences with racism, labeling, and abuse lead Baca to become self-destructive, violent, and deviant. In order for Baca to pursue self-cultivation, he must reflect on and challenge these issues. Chapter Two will delve into the education and self-cultivation of Baca. Here, Baca's self-reflection and literacy education allow him to eventually challenge the damaging societal concepts of race, class and criminality, with which he was raised. Baca's self-cultivation leads to a new love for his Chicano heritage, rejection of the label "criminal," and development as a writer. Chapter Three will focus on the subversive testimonial narration of *A Place to Stand*. Here we uncover how Baca's *A Place to Stand* is a transgressive text that challenges the reader to question inequitable societal precepts. In particular, Chapter Three will challenge destructive interpellations such as deviant and criminal, counter negative stereotypes of Chicanos, question certain elitist attitudes in the Chicano community, and reveal the deceptiveness of the concept of the American Dream for those who live on the margins.

Chapter One: The Bildungsroman-self and Societal Conflict: Racism, Deviance and
Criminalization

Introduction

In *A Place to Stand*, Baca provides important insight on racism, labeling, deviance, and criminalization. Baca initially chronicles his experiences with oppression, showing how his initial self-concept is extremely damaged by the injustice he repeatedly encounters. By detailing the many humiliating and demeaning situations he faces, Baca sheds light on prejudice as well as explains how many young people turn violent and hostile. Moreover, Baca highlights the necessity of countering pernicious messages received at a young age. An understanding of Baca's initial construction of racial and social identities is crucial, for Baca's *bildung* cannot develop without first confronting the racist, dehumanizing sentiments of his youth.

The Formation of Identity

There are many different theories as to what creates identity. Some theorists focus on the role external factors such as race, class, education (among others) play in the development of one's identities. Others focus on the role internal factors such as personality, inner strength and hope (among others) play in identity construction. Both external and internal factors play a central role in Baca's early identity formation and later self-cultivation. While outside factors play a significant and largely negative role in Baca's early identity construction, Baca shows a desire to create a more positive identity for himself, even though it is initially accomplished in a destructive manner.

Before focusing exclusively on Baca's racial and social identities, some theories on identity construction must be reviewed. Sociologists Jones and Schmid view identity as an interactive process. They argue that "identity can be viewed as a negotiation by the self and others in which the individual presents a meaning of his or her self to others and others then validate this meaning, fail to validate it, or counter it with another meaning" (175). Through other's feedback, an individual may develop a deeper understanding of herself or a skewed understanding of herself. Developing a positive reflective identity, then, is based on the ability of the individual to have enough self-knowledge and life experience to wisely accept or resist another's views.

Judith Butler, on the other hand, presents an alternative view for understanding identity. Butler argues that through performativity or repetitive actions, an identity is constructed. In many cases, the identity is based on powerful societal beliefs about how a "boy," "girl," "woman," or "man" *should* behave. A young boy, for instance, might learn early on that crying is not masculine. He becomes "masculine" by emulating other men around him. In this manner, he performs what he believes is masculine behavior (Butler 2486). Referring to performativity, Butler states, "As in other social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (Butler 2500). In this manner, the individual conforms to and constructs an identity based on dominant societal beliefs around gender. While performativity is presented in a

manner that supports the hegemony here, a person may subvert hegemony by performing an identity that challenges authority, as Baca eventually does.

The Impact of Stigma on Identity

Stigmatization deeply harms Baca's early identity, a situation he chronicles poignantly in his work. Goffman notes that there are three types of stigma: physical deformities, blemishes of character, and "tribal" stigmas which are based on race, nation or religion.(73) Baca immediately experiences stigma due to his racial background. Moreover, coming from an abusive home and living on the streets, those in authority question Baca's character. From the beginning, stigmatization negatively affects Baca's upbringing because others view him as "not quite human" (Goffman 73). Goffman notes that often those in the dominant group rationalize their animosity towards those who are stigmatized. In the case of Baca, relegating him to an inferior status allows many people in his life to justify their cruel actions towards him (Goffman 74). Goffman posits that often the stigmatized individual believes that he should receive the same treatment and consideration as other people his age. The person quickly realizes, however, that he is not accepted by society. This causes the individual who has experienced stigma tremendous pain and rage. Often the individual will internalize the racial hatred and prejudice he has received from others (Goffman 75). Even at a young age, Baca intuitively understands stigma. He writes, "I'd begun to feel early on that the state and society at large considered me a stain on their illusion of a perfect America" (29). Baca's initial identity construction is based on shame and

hatred. These beliefs not only profound affect Baca's self esteem, they influence how he chooses to deal with society.

Internalized Racism: The Construction of Self-Hatred

Baca's experiences with racism harm him tremendously. In his book *C-Train and 13 Mexicans*, Baca recalls a painful incident of racial hatred when he recalls someone telling him, "God hates you, spic. God hates you! You're dirt, boy, dirt! Even dirt grows weeds, but you, you're dirt that don't grow nothing but more dirt!" Referring to this early experience of denigration, Baca states,

You have to realize that a five year old child has absolutely no backdrop of comparative thinking with which to gauge . . . a grown up saying, 'You're dirt.' You want to reach back and say, 'I'm not!' But the child doesn't have that. The child has to accept that, and his way of accepting that is to become very frightened of this world . . . (Melendez 3)

Baca's statements reveal a problem with Schmid and Jones' interactive model of identity construction. These racist encounters do lead Baca construct an identity but not a positive one. Baca is unable to "negotiate his self" when he is told he is dirt. Instead of challenging this interpretation of his worth or countering it with another meaning, Baca has no defense against this cruel assessment of his character. Thus, these early bigoted experiences have a profoundly negative effect on his self-concept. Goffman notes that those in the dominant group often "exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively reduce . . . [the stigmatized] life chances" (73). Baca's comments above clearly show how stigmatization can deeply damage a person.

Sadly, it is not only Anglos who perpetuate Baca's hatred for his culture. His family's generational history with internalized racism deeply scar him. Providing background information on internalized racism and Chicanos, Jeanne Guana explains,

After the Mexican-American War ended in 1848, people of Mexican origin faced lynchings, land theft, and virulent racism. Later, in times of economic depression, people of Mexican origin . . . were deported en masse As a result, many Mexican-origin people internalized racism and learned to despise all things Mexican. (qtd in Padilla 67)

In his epic poem, *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*, Baca depicts the conflicted racial messages he receives from his distinctly different grandparents. He writes of being "caught between Indio-Mejicano rural uncles . . . who sang Apache songs with accordions, and Chavez uncles and aunts who vacationed and followed the Hollywood model of *My Three Sons* for their own families" (17). His mother's family's attempt to deny their Chicano heritage and embrace white America is evident in this passage. Their hatred of their heritage is clearly seen when Baca writes about his uncles who accuse his mother of "dishonoring the family by marrying a 'damn Mexican'" (Place11). The irony and sadness that they are attacking and demeaning themselves as well with this comment is not lost on the reader.

John Turner's research on the sociology of minorities shows that one manner in which marginalized individuals seek to deal with prejudice is to deny their heritage (Hebebrand 79). Baca's mother chooses this option when she denies her culture and pretends to be part of the dominant culture. Unfortunately, her views about the inferiority of her group have a devastating impact on Baca and on

herself. Referring to his early childhood experiences with racism, he writes of his mother, “. . . she’d point to white-skinned, blue-eyed children and say I should be like them. When she dressed us, she mentioned that we should look like normal American kids” (Place 14). Baca’s internalized racism is compounded when his mother betrays her children in order to live as a white woman (Place 15). Her self-hatred is so entrenched that she lies to her white boyfriend’s parents at his request, and claims that she is babysitting Baca and his siblings rather than admit that they are her children. Convinced of her own inferiority, Baca’s mother later goes so far as to abandon her offspring and flee into “the white world as ‘Sheila,’ where she could deny her past, hide her identity, and lie about her cultural heritage” (Place 17).

While Baca’s mother’s actions are disturbing to say the least, they reflect the pain of living on the margins in a bigoted society. Padilla argues that the desire to pass for white exists because the individual believes that “becoming White insured greater economic, political and social security. Becoming White. . . was a way to avoid being the object of other’s domination” (70). Certainly, Baca’s mother is not alone in betraying her heritage and herself. Native American writer Louis Owens writes in *Mixedblood Messages* about his own struggle with internalized racism. Owens used to tell schoolmates that the epicanthic folds of his eyes, a trait common among Asians and Natives, was a “handicap” due to a birth trauma rather than admit his heritage when he was a child (191). African American writer Walter Mosley’s insights on internalized racism focus less on physical protection and more on societal influence:

If everybody in the world despises and hates you, sees your features as noteworthy, ugly and simian, makes jokes about your way of talking, calls you stupid and beneath contempt; if you have no history, no heroes, and no future where a hero might lead, then you might begin to hate yourself, your face and features, your parents and even your child. (256)

Hanif Kureishi, a Pakistani-British writer, understands the pernicious nature of internalized racism discussed by Mosley above. He reflects, “I read with understanding a story . . . about a black boy who, when he noticed that burnt skin turned white, jumped into a bath of boiling water” (4). The commentary on internalized prejudice by these writers provides valuable insight to the reader as to why someone on the margins might attempt to pass for white in an intolerant society.

Not surprisingly, just as his mother despises herself, Baca initially hates himself, viewing his Chicano heritage as a sign of inferiority and failure. Following in his mother’s footsteps, Baca attempts to deny his heritage and pretend to be white. He writes, “Once I tried to be a *gavacho*, because the pain of being different was too great. I was going to be as blue-eyed and blond-haired an American as anyone” (Working 80). Baca’s statement is revealing for it shows that he associates being American with being white; in order to be a US citizen, Baca feels that he needs to deny his heritage. Baca’s comments clearly reflect the process of stigmatization that Goffman presents in his book, for he does indeed come to believe that he is not good enough for society.

Here, unfortunately, the educational system in the United States deserves a significant amount of blame for reinforcing and recreating social inequities in the classroom. Gramsci argues that one way to enhance ideological control by

certain groups is to control the knowledge-producing and -preserving institutions of a particular society (Apple 26). The issue of who constructs knowledge and the importance of this issue is further commented on by Joan W. Scott who asks, "What counts as knowledge? Who gets to define what counts as knowledge?" (3). In a society such as the United States, which has a long history of intolerance and degradation, these issues are paramount to creating a more equitable society. Michael Apple posits that "the 'reality' that schools and other cultural institutions select, preserve, and distribute . . . may not serve the interests of every individual and group in society" (27).

Baca's experiences at school only exacerbates his self-hatred and feelings of inferiority. Recalling his schooling, Baca states, "Teachers rejected my Chicano identity, told me my culture came to nothing more than exotic decorations for the lives of the rich . . ." (Working 80). Indeed, the main lesson Baca learns from school is that he is shameful and ignorant. He relates,

From the time I was seven, teachers had been punishing me for not knowing my lessons by making me stick my nose in a circle chalked on the blackboard. Ashamed of not knowing and fearful of asking, I dropped out of school in the ninth grade. At seventeen, I still didn't know how to read (Working 4) ²

Henry Giroux notes of his own experience with education, "Schools and other mainstream public spaces both positioned and excluded us. As an outlaw culture, we were labeled as alien, other, deviant because we were from the wrong culture and class" (8). This is indeed the case for Baca who reflects, "I soon realized that to many, I was just a *mestizo* boy destined for a life of hard work in the fields or mines, and nothing more" (Working 34). Unfortunately, Baca's school experience

is not uncommon among minority students. Christian Jose-Kampfner and Frances Aparicio's study on the effect of racism and violence on urban Latinos found that many children are traumatized by school. They state that "the high dropout rate among Latinos is also a result of the cultural violence exercised against them by schools that perpetuate racism, classism and prejudice" (Brown 64). Thus, instead of helping him, teachers only intensified Baca's internal prejudice.

A Deviant in the Making

Failure to develop a positive identity at home, in school, or in society leads Baca to become deviant. Turning his back on becoming the blond-haired, blue-eyed all-American boy, Baca chooses a new way to develop an identity, one that is as pernicious as his desire to eradicate his previous identity. In *C-Train and 13 Mexicans*, Baca writes, "Twelve years old. I am no good,/dime-bagging Peruvian flakes,/inhaling a glue rag./ I'm brown fighting get-down impromptu warrior,/ . . .haunting you with my gangster signs" (www.jimmysantiagobaca.com).

Ultimately, Baca internalizes the prejudices of the dominant culture. Believing he is no good, he chooses to turn to drugs and violence. Reflecting on the impact dominant society has on his mentality at this stage in his life, Baca writes,

They told me I was violent and I became violent, they told me I was ignorant and I feigned ignorance. Now I had become coauthor with society of my own oppression. The system that wanted to destroy me had taught me self-destruction. I had become my own jailer and racist judge, my own brutal policeman. (Working 35)

Baca's exploration of deviance is an important aspect of his bildungsroman *A Place to Stand*. While many bildungsroman heroes have missteps that later lead to enlightenment, few have been labeled deviant by society to the extent that Baca has. In order for Baca to cultivate himself, he must challenge the interpellation of deviant and criminal, thus, creating an identity outside of prejudiced societal precepts. In order to understand the battle that Baca faces with this situation, we must understand the factors that make Baca prone to deviance, for it is these factors that Baca will need to challenge in order to create a better life for himself.

Stigma, Racism, and Deviance: Lashing Out

Told he is dirt, denied knowledge of any Chicano heroes, abandoned by his mother because he is too brown, Baca internalizes all of the racism, and for him, this eventually leads to breaking the law. Reflecting on violence, Baca says a young child exposed to racism is too young to combat its effects, so he becomes "very frightened of this world, and hence you have the defensiveness of the young cholo in the barrio saying, 'You're not going to step on me!'" (Melendez 2). This certainly fits with Goffman's views that "instead of cowering, the stigmatized individual may attempt to approach mixed contacts with hostile bravado" (17).¹³ It is understandable how someone who has been shamed, rejected, and demeaned would choose to lash out violently against those who have treated him so unjustly.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs may provide a deeper understanding of violence as well. Although the hierarchical design of Maslow's theory does not apply to Baca's story, his theory on the needs individuals must have in order to

achieve self-actualization may provide insight into Baca's situation.³ Maslow believes that people need certain securities in order to be able to grow. These include physiological needs such as a place to sleep and food to eat, safety needs in which a person feels protected, belonging needs where a person feels wanted and loved, and esteem needs which Maslow separates into two categories. He describes outer esteem as a person's positive self-concept due to acknowledgment, respect, and appreciation from those around her. Inner esteem differs from outer esteem in that the person feels good about herself regardless of how others may view her. Maslow strongly believes that violence occurs as a result of people not having their needs met. Indeed, Maslow scholar C. George Boeree argues that "violence and other evils occur when human needs are thwarted People who are deprived of lower needs such as safety may defend themselves by violent means" (<http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html>). Living on the streets, having been beaten, abandoned and verbally abused, Baca has experienced disrespect and even hatred from those around him. It is not surprising that Baca behaves in a deviant manner. Maslow's needs continue to play a role in Baca's life as he gets older. In fact, some of these needs such as security and outer esteem create the desire in Baca to identify as a criminal and to become more violent.⁴

The Social Construction of Deviance

Social factors play quite a significant role in who will become deviant. In *Deviance, Reality and Society*, Box notes that breaking the law or not breaking

the law is based on the individual's attachments and commitments to a given society (141). He notes, for example, that a person from a healthy background may choose to not break the law for fear of harming her family. She may believe that to be a good person, the person her parents raised her to be, she should be law-abiding (Box 141). When a child has not been able to develop positive relationships with adults or role models have not displayed constructive behavior, the child is likely to behave in a deviant manner (Box 142).

Baca's past family history clearly shows a lack of secure relationships with adults. Abandoned by his mother and father, the only positive role models Baca has are his grandfather and grandmother. Due to his grandfather's death and his grandmother's failing health, Baca and his brother are sent to an orphanage at a young age, where instead of building nurturing relationships with the nuns, they are beaten repeatedly. After running away too many times, Baca's aunt signs papers to place him in a detention center, although he has done nothing wrong. Clearly, Baca's relationships with the adults in his life have mainly been defined by neglect, abuse, and disregard.

Along with having virtually no positive relationships with adults, the core relationships Baca has as a child and adolescent are with people who are negative role models. It is noteworthy that Baca begins *A Place to Stand* with a memory of visiting his father in prison when he was only five years old. Shortly after this account, Baca proceeds to describe his father as a drunk, womanizer, wife beater, and even a rapist.(Place 19)⁵

Denying her heritage, betraying Baca and his siblings, and abandoning her children, Baca's mother is also not portrayed in a favorable light. While there are factors that must be taken into consideration to understand her actions, she still needs to be held accountable for the damaging impact she has on those around her. Not only does Baca not have positive role models to emulate as a child, his only role models behave with dishonesty. Lack of positive adult relationships as well as contact primarily with negative role models create a propensity towards deviance in Baca.

The hypocrisy of dominant society also influences Baca's deviant behavior. Box notes that "the less a person believes he should obey the rules, the more likely he is to violate them" (148). Baca notices early on that the playing field is not level. This is made excruciatingly clear when Baca learns that his brother was raped by two white men. Not only is his brother Mieyo physically violated, the two men use his racial and social marginality against him. Baca writes, "... they used legal jargon to threaten him. He would go to prison for breaking and entering...who would believe a young Chicano kid anyway—certainly not over the word of two successful men with good jobs, a nice house, and social standing" (Place 33). His brother's violation leads Baca to believe there is no reason he should obey the laws. After all, his brother's rapist did not.

Another way that Mieyo's rape may have affected Baca is by highlighting the level of powerlessness of those on the margins. This awareness leads Baca to embrace deviance. Indeed, Monica Brown of *Gang Nations* argues that deviance occurs as a reaction to a deep-seated sense of alienation and powerlessness (66).

She further notes that Chicanos are particularly in danger of breaking the law because they are often marked as deviant outsiders, who are dangerous. Baca's comments reflect the truth in Brown's words:

My hope that society would one day invite us in was gone. The world was against us. Rather than let the world beat us down, I had to fight back and I did . . . my fighting was fueled by rage at the world. I wouldn't stop until I was panting with exhaustion as I stared at my opponent bleeding on the pavement. (Place 32, 33)

Feeling powerless in virtually all aspects of his life, it is understandable why Baca turns to violence. Henry Giroux notes of his own violent youth that "asserting . . . physical strength was one of the few resources we had control over" (4). Moreover, fighting now becomes a manner in which Baca can rebel against society.

Self-Destructive Deviance as Resistance: Susan Bordo

Although many outside factors influence Baca's deviance, it would not do him justice to simply label him a victim. While external factors play a significant role in how his life is lived initially, in many ways, Baca strives to create a better life for himself even as he becomes more violent and deviant. Here perhaps Susan Bordo's theory on agoraphobia and middle class women in the Fifties may allow us to understand Baca's struggle for self-definition. Bordo notes that while the agoraphobia that plagued certain women in the Fifties and Sixties was damaging to them and to those in their lives, it was in its own way a rebellion against dominant society and inequitable attitudes towards women during that era.⁶

The social situation of the Fifties placed pressure on women to stay at home and not work. Agoraphobia, a condition that seemed particularly prevalent among women during this time, ensured that women would *only* stay at home. Bordo argues that agoraphobic women protest, in many cases unknowingly, by proclaiming, “You want me in the home? You’ll have me in this home—with a vengeance!” (2367). Indeed, Bordo notes,

Robert Seidenberg and Karen DeCrow . . . describe agoraphobia as a “strike” against “the renunciations usually demanded of ‘some’ and the expectations of housewifely functions such as shopping, driving the children to school, accompanying their husband to social event.(2370)

The woman’s agoraphobia, then, gives her a significant amount of power while at the same time imprisoning her. Bordo highlights the protest element of agoraphobia while, at the same time, emphasizing the “counterproductive, tragically self-defeating (indeed self-deconstructing) nature of that protest” (Bordo 2371). Although the base of the protest--having control and power in one’s life--is positive, the ultimate effects of agoraphobia are deeply damaging.

In many ways, Baca’s relationship with deviance may be seen in a similar manner. While it is ultimately destructive, it is based on his desire to create an identity for himself, even though Baca ultimately creates destruction. Referring to this time in his life, Baca states,

. . . all this destruction from childhood on, was a search for identity that wasn’t being fulfilled by any institution in society, and in fact . . . the destructive elements...were being nourished by the brutality of policemen, brutality of social organizations, brutality of school systems, brutality of government, brutality of racism. So, everything was being nourished to destroy. Nothing was being nourished to discover and create, and I finally destroyed myself (Melendez 3)

Turning to deviance allows Baca to accomplish both issues. In a sense, he proclaims, “You call me dirt! I’ll show you dirt!” Here Baca does not construct his identity by what is seen as the ideal for Chicanos, as the women in Bordo’s book do. Rather, he fashions himself on society’s worst fears: the dangerous, violent, brutal, and hot-tempered Mexican. Just as becoming agoraphobic is destructive for women in the Fifties, becoming deviant is counter-productive for Baca. However, the base of his deviance, the desire to protect himself and create an identity, are positive. In this manner, his decision to behave in a deviant manner emerges from the healthy wish for acceptance, protection, and self-definition.

Baca’s deviance is the ultimate symptom of his conflict with a society that rejects and denigrates him. Similar to many other bildungsroman protagonists, Baca feels stifled by a society that does not understand him. In this situation, issues of race, class, and stigma result in Baca’s alienation from the dominant group. Baca, however, is already showing the desire for a better life. While his initial deviance is ineffective and self-destructive, Baca’s striving for more than what he has will serve him well in the future. With the discovery of language and poetry, Baca is able to cultivate himself, discovering a positive and powerful way to rebel against an intolerant and inequitable society.

Criminality versus Dabbling in Deviance

Although there is a tradition of transformation in prison literature, experiencing mortification, rape and abuse from other prisoners and guards, and

losing a connection with the outside world often have a soul-deadening effect on the prisoner. It is nothing short of astounding that Baca cultivates himself in prison, for this is rarely the case when a person is incarcerated. Sociologist Box notes that with imprisonment, the inmate is ripe for identifying with the label of “criminal.” Box argues that up until the point of conviction a person is “dabbling in dicey and dubious behavior” (168). Although Baca is partaking in deviant behavior, he has not solely identified himself as a deviant or criminal. In other words, Baca is behaving in a deviant manner rather than *being* a deviant. Indeed, being caught, sentenced and *officially* labeled as criminal is one of the circumstances that will most often lead to repeated law-breaking (Box 222).⁷ For certain, many criminalists have viewed the prison system as a prime breeding ground for criminals. Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish* that spending time solely with other criminals not only reinforces an individual’s identity as a convict but also serves to teach her skills in how to be more successful as a criminal. (226) Baca concurs, noting, “The truth is that [prison] entrenches [criminal behavior] more firmly. Confinement perverts and destroys every skill a man needs to live productively in society” (Working 16). One reason for this may be the stripping or mortification of an individual’s identity, which leads to the prisoner embracing the only identity available to her: criminal.

Mortification

In order to understand Baca’s construction of himself as a criminal, a knowledge of Erving Goffman’s study on inmates in total institutions or

institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals, in which individuals are completely divorced from the outside world, is needed. For most interned in a total institution, a process of mortification occurs in which the person is painfully stripped of her previous identity and societal roles. With this mortification, the inmate comes to identify primarily if not solely with the total institution. One manner in which a person is stripped of his identity is through role dispossession. Goffman wisely notes that the concept of self is based on "certain stable social arrangements in his home world" (Goffman 55). One such stable social arrangements is the roles the individual has in the outside world. Essentially, outside the total institution, an individual has access to a daily schedule that promotes a variety of social roles. (Goffman 55) Thus, an individual may budget time in order to perform identities such as parent, spouse, child, worker, soccer player, etc.

Once the individual enters a total institution, however, the daily schedule that allowed him to actively participate in a variety of roles is removed, resulting in role dispossession (Goffman 55). Goffman notes that the individual can no longer actively perform his roles of father, husband, and worker to the extent that he did previous to his incarceration(55). The primary role the individual is now able to perform is linked to the total institution where he is interned (Goffman 55). Thus, work, social life, and even family-like relationships will occur mainly in prison, reinforcing the individual's connection to and identification with the total institution.

55). Thus, work, social life, and even family-like relationships will occur mainly in prison, reinforcing the individual's connection to and identification with the total institution.

Moreover, the various symbolic and physical possessions that are invested with the individual's sense of self will be stripped from the person once she enters the total institution. For instance, the appearance that the person chooses to define herself by in the outside world is now threatened. Her access to hairdressers, clothing stores, make up or what Goffman refers to as an "identity kit" are now virtually impossible to access. These items related to identity and individuality are removed and replaced with a standard uniform and institutional haircut, reinforcing the individual's commonality with other inmates and her identity as a member of a total institution (58). To further the sense of loss of personal identity and further strengthen identification with the group, it is also not uncommon for an individual to be issued a number in place of her name.¹⁰

Goffman notes other ways that mortification occurs. Many prisoners, for instance, are forced to show deference to those in authority. Many are subjected to beatings and name callings, and issues of privacy, prized in the outside world, no longer exist. Goffman states that "[In total institutions] one . . . learns about the limited extent to which a conception of oneself can be sustained when the usual setting of supports for it are suddenly removed" (63). Thus, the individual experiences a painful break with and loss of her previous self-concept. Baca concurs, noting,

When a man leaves prison, he cannot look into the mirror for fear of seeing what he has become. In the truest sense, he no longer knows

himself. Treated like a child by guards, forced to relinquish every vestige of dignity, searched at whim, cursed, beaten, stripped, deprived of all privacy, he has lived...in fear, and this take a terrible toll. (Working 17)

The stripping of roles, possessions, and names create a void in the individual. In need of some form of identity, the person latches on to the one identity that is clearly available to him. In this case, the total institution provides the identity of “criminal” for the individual. Thus, the person comes to believe that he is not in prison because he *committed* a crime but because he *is* a criminal. This shift in the outlook of the individual usually leads to repeated acts of criminality (Goffman 58).

Peer Influence and Survival Education: An Escalation of Violence

Not only is the individual stripped of his identity but he is now submerged in a prison culture. In order to survive, the person will need to change his behavior, often leading to an escalation of violence. Reflecting on the difference between prison culture and the “free” world, Baca writes, “On the streets people could cry freely, but in prison tears led to challenges and deep, embittered stares. In prison no one shakes hands, that common gesture of friendship or trust. [Prison] is a dead land, filled with threat . . .” (Working 15, 16).

Baca’s first realization that prison is far different from the outside world occurs when he realizes another prisoner wants to rape him. Here Baca becomes educated in survival, and this education is brutal. Macaron, a veteran prisoner, who acts as guide to Baca, tells him,

He’s a four time loser. You can fight with your fists, but you have to use a shank, too. He’ll have one. I know you’re scared, but this is the way it is.

What you knew on the streets is over In the joint you live by the convict code, no gray areas: fight or get punked, step out or be turned out (Place 119)

Consequently, Baca does fight the inmate, and the description of the altercation is quite gruesome. “Blood squirted across the air in thick sprays A part of his eye and a chunk of cut cheek flesh dangled as he tripped . . .” (Place 122). While this description is graphic, it emphasizes the level of Baca’s aggression; this is not a simple fist fight.

Baca shows just how different the prison world and outside world are, for rather than being alienated for his actions, he is rewarded. Baca writes about his new found status, saying,

With respect came double servings on the chow line, guards let me stay out on the tier . . . and . . . Chicanos . . . dropped off cigarettes and coffee . . . young Chicanos stuck close by me . . . keeping an eye on me. I felt good to be part of them. (Place 126)

This is Baca’s first experience with power, belonging and respect. While he is proud of his new status; he is also concerned: “I had proven myself . . . and I was proud, but I also felt bad because instead of changing for the better, I was becoming more violent. It was the first time I ever beat a guy with an angle iron . . .” (Place 124).

Baca has good reason to be concerned. He is stripped of his possessions, his name, and the roles he possessed in the outside world. With this fight, he has now earned acceptance, security, belonging, and respect, many of Maslow’s needs. Having received lower esteem needs from other cons for behaving in a violent manner, Baca risks losing their regard if he behaves differently. It would

only be natural for Baca to identify as criminal, for it now provides him with certain needs that he did not previously possess.

For Baca, survival education is the first education he receives in prison. It is bloody, violent, and inhumane but without it, as will be seen in Chapter Two, his ability to cultivate himself would be limited at best. He must learn to protect himself before he can afford to look inward and challenge the many pernicious messages society has provided him.

The survival education Baca receives, however, is also a double edged sword. Just as this education protects him, it is equally capable of destroying his humanity and decency and forever labeling him a “criminal.” Indeed, veteran prisoner Macaron, the man who mentors Baca, talks about the destructive impact prison has had on his life, stating:

[my soul] died. That day, I became a criminal . . . the hurt inside turns to bitterness . . . and you look forward . . . not to resume your life but to hurt people the way they hurt you . . . for the hurting and hurting, for the day when you couldn't take it anymore but you had to and lost your humanity, lost . . . the reason for wanting to be a human being. (Place 131)

Macaron describes prison as a place where a person is in danger of losing his desire to be human. Fighting the hurt and pain, the prisoner eventually gives up and gives in, coming to define himself as a criminal. Throughout his time in prison, Baca battles to maintain his humanity.

Conclusion

In many ways, Baca's entry into prison at age twenty-one seems destined to occur based on the outside social factors that he repeatedly faces. Experiencing

feels he is a “stain” on the American Dream. Living in an abusive home and later sent to an orphanage and detention center, Baca has no stability in his life to cultivate a positive identity. Indeed, his feelings of shame and self-hatred are deepened by the cruel ways that he is treated in these institutions. His brother’s rape leads Baca to lash out violently at a society that refuses to make room his loved ones and him. It is at this point that Baca truly embraces deviance and violence as a means of getting back at and resisting dominant society.

In prison, Baca undergoes a process of mortification, where his identity in the outside world is stripped from him. Baca must also now fight with a level of brutality and violence previously unknown to him. As he learns to protect himself, he also moves closer to identifying as a criminal. Even more pernicious, Baca risks losing his humanity as his friend Macaron has.

It is in Chapter Two, however, that we see Baca challenge the derogatory messages he received for the first twenty years of his life. Stuart Hall notes that “a notion of identity ...is always in the making, a matter of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’” (qtd. in Pulitano 81). Fortunately, for Baca, his previous socially-conceived, negative sense of self is not a permanent state. Where outside influences shaped Baca’s identity as a young man, in prison Baca takes control of his life by defining his own beliefs, developing a deeper self awareness, acquiring a love for his culture, and discovering the positive power of language.

Chapter Two: Identity from Within: The Self-Cultivation and Education of
Jimmy Santiago Baca

Introduction

Receiving respect and acknowledgement for the first time, Baca is in peril of embracing a criminal identity permanently. Fortunately, Baca receives other forms of education while incarcerated. He becomes a subject, challenging the interpellation of criminal. He learns how to read and write, which allows him to develop self-awareness, discover and strengthen an identity outside of “convict,” and help others who are in a powerless position. Baca also learns about his history, language, and traditional ways, infusing him with a sense of pride in his Chicano roots he had previously not known.

Reverse Mortification and Misrecognition: The Education of a Subject

Baca experiences two instances of mortification while in prison: one that encourages him to identify as a criminal, the other that forces him to find an identity outside of prison. The second mortification occurs after the prison committee unfairly accuses Baca of being in a gang and denies him permission to study for his GED. Psychologically, this is a dangerous time for Baca. Like Macaron before him, Baca is seeking to better himself. Turned down by the prison committee despite false encouragement from a counselor, Baca risks ending up like Macaron, who recalls, “I was like you—hoping for a better life, working to do right—but that time passed I lost hope” (Place 130). Faced with the choice of giving up or fighting back, Baca chooses to rebel in a

very unusual manner. He refuses to work, and in so doing, he acts in a manner that contrasts with his earlier aggressive behavior. He states:

As I grew a little older, I learned to strike back. This time I didn't lash out, which short-circuited everyone's expectation of how a con was supposed to act . . . not doing what everyone expected turned out to be the most powerful thing I ever did. I knew in my soul that if I had gone along with their classifying me as they wished . . . I would still be in prison today. (Place 169)

By not working, Baca does not comply with routine power transactions that are often taken for granted. In essence, Baca does not behave as a "docile body" (Foucault 152). Foucault posits that "disciplinary control does not consist simply in teaching or imposing a series of particular gestures . . . In the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless . . ." (Foucault 152). Baca's protest has such a strong impact because his body becomes "idle and useless" when he chooses not to work. By refusing to comply with the daily prison routine, Baca deeply unsettles power.

At the heart of Baca's resistance is his refusal to accept the classification of him provided by the prison committee. Althusser and Butler's work on interpellation enhance our understanding of Baca's actions. Althusser's term interpellation refers to the "naming" of an individual. When this person responds to the name given to him, he accepts the identity established by the speaker. (Butler 238) Butler examines Alththusser's concept of interpellation and focuses on misrecognition, in which the power to name or establish an identity for someone falters if the individual does not accept or recognize the name bestowed upon her (238). Butler further relates this issue of "misrecognition" beyond individual persons stating:

Consider the force of this dynamic of interpellation and misrecognition when the name is not a proper name but a social category If that name is called, there is more often than not a hesitation over whether or how to respond, for what is at stake is whether that temporary totalization performed by the name is politically enabling or paralyzing, . . . indeed the violence, of the totalizing reduction of identity performed by that particular hailing is politically strategic. (239)

When Baca refuses to behave as a subordinate and rebels peacefully rather than lashing out, he denies the validity of the classification of prisoner. This action frees Baca to construct an identity as a subject, separate from the label of prisoner previously bestowed upon him.

Baca's evolution as a subject advances dramatically when his actions cost him the high regard he has earned in prison, for his refusal to work not only unsettles those in power but other inmates as well. As was noted previously, power transactions are often so buried that most people do not even consider behaving in a less compliant manner. Following rules such as working are considered the norm, not an option or a form of rebellion. Consequently, Baca's resistance is so foreign to other inmates that his actions are seen as weakness. Searching for why Baca would behave as he does, the prisoners fall back on what they understand: Baca must be a punk or a snitch. Feeling betrayed by his "weakness," the prisoners strip him of their friendship, protection, and respect. When Baca is transferred to another prison wing due to his refusal to work, he writes,

They shook the bars, yelping like hyenas . . . I tried to tell myself they were cursing the guards, but it was me they were condemning . . . a cup of scalding water hit me in the shoulder I turned and someone else threw urine Their rage and censure were forcing me to find something out about myself which didn't exist yet Stripped of everything I believed in—pride, friends, my reputation for being a solid con I felt as if I

was on the verge of discovering something beyond what I knew about myself in the world. (Place 168)

Baca endures a second mortification. This time, however, all that previously encouraged Baca to identify as a con are violently removed, forcing Baca to once again construct an identity for himself.

The Power of Language: An Education of Self-Cultivation

Baca's refusal to work is not his first serious act of rebellion. While in prison awaiting his trial, Baca witnesses a couple of guards beating and humiliating a man. As an act of defiance, Baca reaches through the bars and steals a book. In many ways, Baca does not understand his actions and even views books quite negatively. He writes,

. . . books had always been used to hurt and inflict pain. Books separated me from people like those two detectives, who used law books to perpetrate wanton violence against poor people, and from greedy lawyers, who used law books to twist the truth. (Place 100)

It is no wonder that Baca initially is antagonistic towards books since language, both written and spoken, has repeatedly been used against those that he loves and himself. His brother, Mieyo, after all, is violated not only physically but verbally. Baca, convicted of a crime he did not commit, is intimidated by the lawyer's language. Reflecting on language, Baca states, "There was nothing so humiliating as being unable to express myself, and my inarticulateness increased my sense of jeopardy, of being endangered. I felt intimidated and vulnerable . . ." (Working 4). Thus, for Baca, language belongs to those in power, and more importantly,

those who abuse power. At this stage in Baca's life, he feels that language is not something that a poor, abused Chicano would be allowed to access.

Another reason why Baca rejects books may be due to his sense of what sort of person would be drawn to them. Baca reflects, "No matter how much I liked the story, I would never spend money on a book. Guys like me hung out and bullshitted all day I'd never owned a book and had no desire to own one" (100). Baca's sense of identity is tied up with how "guys like me" behave. His desire to never own a book may partially stem from feeling that language is not something he should possess, but it may also be a way of asserting an identity separate from and in defiance of white middle-class educated society. To cultivate himself through language, then, Baca must challenge the limitations of what he believes it means to be "a guy like me." As Baca becomes literate, he is able to heal himself, define his beliefs and values more clearly, create a strong identity separate from prison, and help those around him. In this manner, Baca subverts the manner in which he saw books utilized previously, using his education for productive rather than destructive purposes.

Ironically, it is while Baca is in the Dungeon, the worst part of the prison, as punishment for refusing to work, that Baca learns how to read and write and uses language to cultivate himself. He starts to write to a man named Harry, a disabled fundamentalist Christian and World War II veteran, who plays an important although ephemeral role in Baca's life. As mentioned earlier, Silbey notes that "stories are media through which identities are negotiated" (1341). It is not only having a story that is of importance but telling the story to someone

willing to listen. Silbey explains, “An untold story is, in fact, no story” (1343). Harry acts as the audience for Baca’s stories, an action that profoundly impacts Baca’s life. Because Harry is willing to listen to and interact with Baca’s letters, he provides Baca the opportunity to form greater awareness, convictions, and identity. Harry’s responsiveness (even as he’s trying to convert Baca) validates Baca’s views and life experiences. For the first time, Baca has an outlet to explore his ideas. This is most clearly seen when Harry tries to sway Baca to see himself as unable to do anything to change his life because it is all in God’s hands. Baca quickly writes back, saying, “God hadn’t done a thing for me. That justice was abused by the rich; as proof, the prison had 90 percent poor Chicanos in it. I went on about poverty, violence, murder, abuse and greed” (Place 187). Based on Sociologists Jones and Schmid’s interactive model of identity formation presented in Chapter One, Baca is asserting an identity for himself, by openly rejecting and challenging Harry’s views. This shows his evolution as an individual from when Baca was a child, incapable of counteracting racist sentiments directed at him. Even faced with alienating Harry and losing the one person who provides him encouragement, Baca continues to express his views:

his tolerance was being taxed but I couldn’t help myself. Having someone listen to me for the first time in my life, and take me and my views seriously, I kept writing A little voice in my head was finally talking about what I had known all my life I felt I was writing for my life. (Place 188)

Although Harry does not continue to exchange letters with Baca, his willingness to listen for a short period of time allows Baca to continue to develop his beliefs

and build his identity as a subject, moving him away from his friend Macaron's loss of hope and humanity.

Moreover, language permits Baca to develop self-awareness and heal from his past wounds. Reflecting on the power of language, Baca writes, "For the first time the child in me who had witnessed and endured unspeakable terrors cried out not just in impotent despair but with the power of language. They were wrong, those others, and now I could say it" (Working 7). Unlike the pedophiles, racist lawyers or judges who abused language, Baca finds a way to use language as a balm for his wounds. By facing his painful past, Baca comes to terms with his shame and self-hatred, creating a deeper level of acceptance and awareness of himself.

Not only does language allow Baca to develop a clearer sense of self and heal past wounds, Baca is able to develop and strengthen an identity that is separate from prison. Beginning with the very first letter that Baca wrote to Harry, he sees himself in a new light. He writes, "I pictured myself as a man in those black-and-white movies, an important man writing letters with business to do, plans to fulfill. Writing letters added an exciting dimension to my lackluster days and gave me a sense of self esteem" (Place 185). Writing allows Baca to see himself as a different person: romantic, productive, and important. While this image is at the present time a fantasy, it permits Baca to conceive of himself as more than just "bad," deviant, and violent. More importantly, writing letters cultivates Baca's inner esteem, one of the more significant values discussed by Maslow.

Baca is so captivated by language that he begins to perform the role of student and writer. He recalls of learning how to read and write:

After hours of plodding word by word to write a clear sentence After a day of looking up words and writing, I'd be exhausted I can't describe how words electrified me. I found myself waking up at 4 A.M. to reread a word or copy a definition. (Place 185)

Clearly, Baca is not passively accepting an identity for himself. He is actively pursuing and performing an identity as a writer. This correlates with Judith Butlers' concept of performativity in which an individual constructs an identity through the repeated actions they perform (140). Moreover, improving his writing skills strengthens Baca's growing inner esteem, which further reinforces his sense of self as separate from prison. Since he is primarily writing poetry and reading, he is "performing" and creating an identity: that of poet. At the same time, Baca negotiates a self that does not reject the other inmates and, in essence himself, since prison is a part of his identity as well. In fact, he clearly establishes that the prisoners play a central role in the construction of his new identity.

Where previously, Baca's writing was an interactive pursuit with Harry or an individual act, his persistent focus on writing eventually creates a new audience both inside and outside of prison. Honing his writing skills, Baca is "employed" as a writer by other prisoners. He writes to other con's girlfriends in exchange for coffee and cigarettes. Moreover, the other inmates acknowledge Baca's dedication to reading and writing. One of the cons asks Baca, "Is that all you ever do is . . . read?" (Place 230). Indeed, Baca becomes a sort of teacher to other prisoners. Asked what he is reading, Baca responds by describing particular inmates as verbs, nouns, and adjectives. He states, "And you Garcia, you're an

adjective: flair, pizzazz, and color” (Place 231). Baca’s status as a writer and reader is validated by the other convicts to such an extent that when it becomes known that the guards are tearing up Baca’s journals and confiscating his books, the death row prisoners begin to send him literature (Place 193). All of these instances reflect that now Baca is not interpellated solely as a convict but as a writer as well. By endorsing his desire to make something of himself, Baca’s fellow prisoners help him strengthen his identity as a writer.

In time, Baca even questions just how a prisoner should be. Previously, he noted that “guys like me” do not read books. This view is challenged when Baca meets a prisoner named Nick, who wears a silk gentleman’s jacket and smokes a Cuban cigar. Although incarcerated, Nick is a journalist who introduces Baca to Russian novelists. Not only is he a successful writer and an inspiration to Baca, Nick clearly contrasts with the stereotypical image of a prisoner (Place 199). This, in turn, frees Baca to create an identity outside of societal or internal expectations of how he should behave.

Baca’s positive self construction is further nurtured outside of prison. Baca corresponds with two poets, Norman and Virginia. In fact, Baca begins a romantic relationship with Virginia while in prison, once again strengthening his ties and identity with the outside world. Moreover, Baca’s correspondence with a variety of magazines editors such as Norman Moser, Denise Levertov, Joseph Bruchac cultivate his identity further as a poet, someone more than and separate from a criminal. Baca’s assertion of a self separate from prison is paramount for several reasons. Baca is now part of a law-abiding community in the outside

world. These ties, as Stephen Box notes, reinforce Baca's desire to not break the law when he is released. Considering that once a person is incarcerated their chances of repeat offenses are high, this is significant.

Through language, Baca is able to honor the many people in his life who are powerless and victimized. Although this issue will be dealt with in far greater detail in Chapter Three, it deserves some attention here as well. While in prison, Baca becomes a chronicler of the pain and injustice many prisoners face. When a riot breaks out, one of Baca's friends is killed. He writes,

They lined us up naked against the wall . . . Officers ordered us not to move, but Ray Ray turned and they shot him. His blood spattered on . . . the side of my face. Through the corner of my eye, I saw a shattered family portrait of Ray Ray with his wife and kids. Later, I dealt with Ray Ray's murder the only way I could. I wrote a poem for him and sent it to his family. (Place 229)

Baca refuses to allow Ray Ray to become an anonymous statistic of violence. His poem about Ray Ray acknowledges him as a person with a family, who will grieve for him. Baca's writing further establishes that Ray Ray's death is not self-defense but a murder. Thus, Baca's poem about Ray Ray challenges prison authority and speaks for a person who was powerless. This is a significant change from how Baca previously handled his own feelings of powerlessness and rage. Where before, Baca would lash out in violence, now he can use poetry as a form of protest.

Baca continues to develop his role as a chronicler and protester of prison life when he writes a poem about the legislators who come to the prison after the riot to secure votes rather than make any significant changes. Asked by the other prisoners to read a poem, Baca reads "They Only Came to See the Zoo" where he

not a dream/And that you've been there?" (Place 232). Baca is using his poetry to speak of the inhumanity of incarceration and the disinterest and insincerity of those in power who could help make the prison a less soul-destroying place. The high regard Baca receives for writing about wrongdoing in the criminal justice system is further depicted after the warden refuses to let Baca out of prison on his release date. Believing he will never be let out and succumbing to rage, Baca decides to kill an Aryan skinhead who murdered a Chicano inmate. However, before Baca can approach the skinhead, another inmate named Mascara kills him. Mascara explains his actions to Baca: "He wrote that he was already doing life and wanted to spare me the same. He wrote that I didn't belong in prison, that I needed to be out there writing for people like him, telling the truth about the life that prisoners have to endure" (Place 255). While many critics have wisely pointed out the ways "speaking for" others may be problematic, the prisoners proudly interpellate Baca as a spokesman for their pain and loss. This is a role Baca is honored to perform. He writes,

My job was to witness and record the "it" of their lives, to celebrate those who didn't have a place to stand and call home. I do this partly out of selfishness, because it helps to heal my own impermanence, my own despair. My role as witness is to give voice to the voiceless and hope to the hopeless, of which I am one. (Place 244)

As will be discussed further in Chapter Three, writing allows Baca to unsettle power and challenge unjust societal precepts, including the stereotype of the remorseless, soulless prisoner.

Language versus Violence

Baca's struggle to keep his humanity while in prison is continually tested even after he discovers the power of language. This particularly occurs when Bonafide, a friend who Baca admires and looks up to, brutally rapes another prisoner. Baca recalls, "Bonafide was raping the man, pulverizing him to nothing but a crumpled and bloody writhing heap of meat without mind or soul" (Place 190). The level of graphic detail in this passage is shocking and important, for it depicts the extent of Bonafide's brutality and sadism. This disturbing event forces Baca to reflect on survival and self-cultivation. Although Baca believes that if Bonafide had not raped the prisoner to keep him from moving into his cell, he would have been raped, he is still shaken by how prison can destroy someone's humanity. He writes of Bonafide's violent rage,

The seeds of that rage are nourished by prison brutality and fertilized by fear and law of survival of the fittest. And this kind of firestorm wrath crushed even the divine rules of Harry's God, because once a man has it in him, the man, when the rage comes out, becomes god. (Place 191)

Like Macaron, Bonafide has been harmed so intensely, he now strives to harm others.

Reflecting on the choices he has available to him, Baca compares Bonafide to Harry. While Harry represents the humane, educated side of Baca; Bonafide symbolizes the ruthless side that is needed in order to survive in prison. Baca realizes that although Harry is spiritual and kind, he would not have survived prison. Ultimately, Harry would have given up his cell and been raped. (Place 191) Reflecting on the two, Baca notes that "Bonafide had passion and no God; he took life to survive, while Harry's excessive piety respected life and

drained it of passion. Harry's world had nothing to do with me. But neither did Bonafide's" (Place 191). Although Bonafide is educated to survive, he has lost a sense of what it means to be a human being. Harry, on the other hand, acts humanely and is devoted to God but would not survive in prison.

Baca shows his ability to combine aspects of Harry and Bonafide when an inmate comes to Baca's cell looking to stay. He states, "Instinctively, I followed Bonafide's example, but not to his extreme. When the guard racked my cell, I leaped out and hit the guy" (Place 193). Baca protects himself by behaving violently but does not behave in a vicious manner. Thus, he incorporates his survival and self-cultivation education into how he handles potentially threatening situations. By not tapping into and acting on the type of rage that Bonafide feels, Baca handles a potentially violent situation in an oddly humane and respectful manner. Through his interactions with Harry and Bonafide, Baca develops a deepening sense of self awareness, discovering ways to survive in prison and retain his humanity at the same time.

Chicanismo: An Education in Chicano Pride

As Baca develops as an individual, he is able to question the negative views of his heritage. Baca's evolving sense of pride in his Chicano roots begins as a teenager but does not truly take form until he has been in prison for a while. Baca's first awareness that Chicanos have a history occurs when he sees *450 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*, a book that shows historic Mexican and Chicano heroes such as Padre Hidalgo and Cesar Chavez. He writes, "I showed

the book to friends. All of us were amazed; this book told us we were alive. The book reflected back to us our struggle in a way that made us proud" (Working 4). Baca's discovery is significant.

Dismissed as a migrant worker by teachers and taught only about white history, Baca's education mirrors Apple's assessment that education does not serve the interest of all groups and individuals. Indeed, Scott's question about what counts as knowledge further resonates here. Lauren Berlant argues that individuals are transformed "into subjects of a collectively held history. Its traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its ritual and narratives provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness of national subjectivity" (qtd in Brown 64). Expanding on this, Monica Brown suggests that many people in the margins are kept "functionally illiterate, excluded from learning the 'alphabet' because membership in this shared national symbolic is predicated on the exclusion of others" (64). Baca is excluded from this national symbolic as a student. He is never taught about the many heroes from his culture, and minority achievements are not acknowledged, much less validated in Baca's school. This, in turn, creates a false sense that only those in the dominant group contribute to society. The picture book of Chicano history, however, challenges this view because now he can create a shared "cultural symbolic" (as opposed to national symbolic) with other Chicanos. He now possesses heroes, metaphors, and narratives that will allow him to build his own "meaning-giving" alphabet.

Baca is blessed with many teachers in prison, who allow him to develop this cultural alphabet, allowing him to establish a deep sense of pride and love for

Baca is blessed with many teachers in prison, who allow him to develop this cultural alphabet, allowing him to establish a deep sense of pride and love for his Chicano background. Not surprisingly, literature, language, and history play a significant role in Baca's evolving identity. The first time Baca is arrested, he encounters "prisoners who read aloud to each other the works of Neruda, Paz, Sabines Their language was magic that could liberate me from myself" (Working 4). Here, the healing power of language and pride in his Latino heritage come together creating a sense of serenity in Baca. Significantly, Baca is adding to his knowledge of the "cultural symbolic." He is now aware that there are many highly regarded poets of Latin American origin; not all poets are of Anglo descent. Moreover, the prisoners show Baca that he has a language of which he was previously unaware. Baca remembers, ". . . these Chicanos . . . went into their own Chicano language. I began to learn my language, the bilingual words and phrases, explaining to me my place in the universe" (Working 5). Indeed, this language is composed of Mexican and Native words originating from Mayans, Olmecs, and Aztecs (Place 223). Thus, this Chicano language is rooted in Mexico's historical past. Speaking this language bridges Baca with his history. Since Baca is previously denied any knowledge of his culture, this is a significant occurrence.

Baca's education about his heritage further advances when he befriends Chelo, the individual who becomes Baca's most influential teacher of Chicano culture. Baca notes,

I'd grown up in an American society filled with stereotypical labels that discredited my people as inferior and lesser in moral character. Chelo went

back to the beginning, telling me . . . the Mayans, Olmecs, and Mexican tribes were hundreds of years ahead of the Europeans in mathematics, agriculture, astronomy, literature, medicine, engineering, and aqueduct systems . . . I began to see who I was in a new context, with a deeper sense of responsibility and love for my people. (Place 225)

What began with a picture book of Mexican history eventually leads to strong cultural pride. The convicts, usually seen only as violent by society, provide Baca a far more productive and healthy view of his culture than the teachers who were supposed to educate him. Even more importantly, individuals such as Chelo not only teach Baca Chicano history, he literally wears his pride in being Chicano on his skin. Baca states,

. . . to outsiders his tattoos symbolized criminality and rebellion. But it was not so, he said, "I wear my culture on my skin. They want to make me forget who I am, the beauty of my people and my heritage, but to do it they got to peel my skin off. And if, they ever do that, they'll kill me doing it—and that's good, because once they make you forget the language and history, they've killed you anyway. I'm alive and free, no matter how many bars they put behind me." (Place 223, 224)

Chelo, then, does not solely recite impressive facts about Chicano history, he lives his pride. This level of dedication and love for Chicano culture deeply impacts Baca, encouraging him to cultivate a respect and pride in his Chicano identity. Thus, Baca is able to negotiate a new identity, a new alphabet, based on his exposure to positive Chicano role models in books and in prison.

Baca not only learns new information about his Chicano heritage, he is also able to access the positive teachings of his paternal grandfather. Where previously Baca remembered his mother's shame of her heritage and his father's humiliation, being placed in Isolation helps Baca recall his gentle, loving grandfather. In essence, Isolation allows Baca to regain an early positive

connection with his heritage that he forgets after a series of traumatic racist events. Baca reflects on his grandfather, saying, "I want to be like him one day. He looks at the clear sky and land and houses all around and slaps his chest lightly to indicate how he loves the dawn When I'm with him like this, life is beautiful" (Place 136,7). His grandfather, a man that symbolizes to Baca the best aspects of Chicano culture, is loving, affectionate, playful, and generous with those around him.(Place 136)

Isolation, often dreaded by prisoners, allows Baca to recapture his own knowledge of what it means to be Chicano. Baca writes of his reclaimed knowledge of his heritage, "I felt all my people . . . in my people's irascible desire to live, which was mine as well. I felt their will was growing inside of me . . . filled with a serene, communal sense of belonging" (Place 152-153). Thus, while in prison, Baca learns about his culture. More importantly, it allows Baca to build and eventually strengthen a connection with his people. Instead of feeling shame and loathing, Baca embraces the beauty of his heritage.

Conclusion

In prison, Baca grows as an individual in a variety of ways. Before he can cultivate himself, he first needs to reject the interpellation of criminal and "bad person" that has defined him since a young age. Baca is able to successfully accomplish this when he refuses to accept the prison committee's classification of himself. Refusing to work leads Baca to be stripped of friends, respect, and status. This second mortification forces Baca to discover an identity outside of

out against injustice. Moreover, the healing properties of language prevent Baca from tapping into the violent, brutal rage that lives inside Bonafide. With writing, Baca can consciously choose to protect himself and still maintain his humanity. Baca further cultivates himself when he rejects the negative images he associated with being Chicano. Learning about his culture and rediscovering the ways of his heritage, Baca continues to develop a strong sense of identity as well as deeper connections with his community. This, in turn, leads Baca to now turn outward and write in a manner that challenges inequality and prejudice.

Chapter Three: The Subversive, Transformative Nature of Testimonial Narratives in *A*
Place to Stand

Introduction

As he cultivates himself, Baca becomes “society-centered,” allowing him “to shape his true self”(Kontje 69). Typically, a bildungsroman protagonist develops strong, productive relationships with members of his family and community after achieving a deeper self-awareness. Baca diverges from this tradition in his bildungsroman documents his interactions with those around him as well as with large groups such as Chicanos, prisoners, and U.S. citizens. One reason why Baca’s work is effective as a subversive text is because he “breaks through,” a term coined by Goffman to describe when an individual with a stigma is able to communicate effectively with those who possess prejudices against his group. One man refers to breaking through as making “a dent in the education of the world” (Goffman 52). Baca’s narrative does indeed educate his audience about another side of the United States. Susan Silbey argues that “every social transaction...has the capacity to reproduce or challenge familiar arrangements and ways of doing things” (1335). Certainly, Baca’s work creates a social transaction between reader and writer.

Baca brings the individuals who are silenced and dismissed by society to the center of his narrative, refusing to either deny their existence or keep them at the margins of society. Silbey writes,

If narratives instantiate power to the degree that they regulate silence and colonize consciousness, subversive stories are those that break that silence. Stories that are capable of countering the hegemonic are those . . . that . . . bear witness to what is unimagined and unexpressed. (220)

Baca offers the reader a view into his world, a world often brutal and dehumanizing. All too often, this world has been ignored, unimagined, and unexpressed. Baca focuses on subverting popular concepts of prisoners and prisons, challenging misinformed views of Chicanos, and taking on elitist Chicanos. Most importantly, Baca openly challenges the popular concept of the American Dream, urging Americans to question the assumption that opportunity is available for all who are citizens of the United States.

Subverting Popular Concepts of Prisoners

In *A Place to Stand*, Baca writes in a manner that “breaks through” and educates the reader about popular misconceptions surrounding prisons and prisoners. Sociologist Steven Box notes, “There is no doubt that there are serious and intentional attempts to instruct us on . . . crime and criminals. Neither is there any doubt that . . . these attempts are successful” (58). Box asserts that frequently criminals are lumped together as all the same (102). Except in rare cases, the inmate is presented as a born monster, without heart or soul. Indeed, Jones and Schmid argue that “prisoners are portrayed as violent people who are capable of enormous cruelty to their fellow inmates and to the world at large” (2). Baca challenges the simplicity of this view. In his text, Baca not only refuses the interpellation of criminal provided for him, he further asks the reader to question their own assumptions about prisoners. Baca’s complex depiction of Chelo is a prime example of this. He writes,

I'd heard he'd been one of the Inner Circle mafia bosses He was a heroin addict and sported the baddest gangster walk, talk, and attitude . . . and a contrary demeanor that had helped him survive doing time at Marion, San Quentin, Folsom, Huntsville and Florence. (Place 222)

It would be easy to label Chelo as a "bad person." Chelo has clearly spent most of his life in prison for breaking the law, but Baca does not permit the reader to so quickly dismiss Chelo. Along with the description just presented, Baca also depicts Chelo as a good friend and a courageous person who rebels against the negative stereotypes associated with his race. It is Chelo, not Baca's teachers, who educates Baca about Chicano myths, history, and literature. Chelo is the person Baca most credits for teaching him to embrace the beauty of his culture. Baca also views Chelo as an extraordinary poetry critic, writing,

He had a critic's instinct for knowing a good poem, this came from his motto, NEVER BACK UP. He had put his life on the line so many times that he had an uncanny sense of what's real and what's not. There was no room for academic foreplay or pretentiousness. (Place 249)

Although Baca establishes that Chelo has a criminal side to him, he also interpellates him as a teacher, scholar, proud member of his group, and poetry critic, roles traditionally associated with members of dominant society. After reading *A Place to Stand*, the audience cannot simply view Chelo as an anonymous brutal criminal. While Chelo is capable of deviance, he is also capable of so many other things. By writing about Chelo, Baca advocates questioning simplistic stereotypes of prisoners.

Baca further subverts stereotypical images of prisoners when he writes about Macaron. Baca describes him with a humanity that his friend believes he has lost forever. He presents Macaron as a mentor, protector, and good friend. In

fact, without Macaron's guidance, Baca may never have survived long enough to develop his identity as a poet. By depicting Macaron's tutelage and concern, Baca portrays him as someone who may have believed he has lost his soul, but certainly has not lost his compassion or his ability to try to save a friend in pain. In this manner, Baca reconstitutes Macaron as an individual who does possess a humanity despite the fact that he most likely is not the person that he once was. In doing this, Baca again refuses to allow all prisoners to be lumped together anonymously. While most of the people that Baca meets in prison have behaved destructively, he makes it a disservice to simply label and dismiss all prisoners.

Even when a prisoner behaves in monstrous ways as Bonafide does, Baca presents complex reasons for what leads Bonafide to become so brutally violent. Baca's early talks with Macaron provide important insight into why someone would lash out in such a brutal manner. Macaron explains, "... you look forward ... not to resume your life but to hurt people the way they hurt you" (Place 131). Baca, himself, chronicles the violent effect prison has on him. He recalls, "I had stepped over that line where a human being has lost more than he can bear ... I was now capable of killing, coldly and without feeling" (Working 10). Indeed, Baca shows just how strongly these feelings have the power to rule him when he describes almost killing a man. He states, "In that one jeweled moment I felt I was God, deciding whether he would live or die. That feeling of power nearly compensated for everything that had been going wrong in my life" (Place 209, 210). Baca's description of his state of mind mirrors how he depicts Bonafide's violent rage.

Baca, however, is lucky in that he discovers language, which allows him to face his demons rather than act out violently. Baca writes of his thirst for violence, saying, “I felt prepared to destroy my life in a frenzy of violence My writing became the receptacle for my sorrow. I wrote even when I didn’t want to, because I knew that, if I didn’t, my sorrow would come out in violence” (Place 234, 235). After leaving prison, Baca becomes a successful writer and receives a doctorate degree. A dedicated father and activist for Chicano and prison issues, Baca’s writing reflects his compassion, sensitivity, and loving nature. However, if Baca had not discovered language, there is a strong likelihood that he would have ended up becoming another Bonafide. By writing of his own rage, Baca places himself alongside Bonafide, showing the reader that even the most gentle and loving person can become vicious in prison. Baca argues for the reader to consider that those imprisoned are not *born* ultra-violent but are *made* ultra-violent while incarcerated. Through his complex depictions of Chelo, Macaron, Bonafide, and himself, Baca subverts simplistic and typical classifications employed by society and forces the reader to question the often taken-for-granted labeling of criminals.

Subverting Misconceptions about the Criminal Justice System

Baca further challenges the criminal justice system by exposing its bias and prejudice. The saying “There are no millionaires on death row” reflects the reality that justice is definitely not blind. Class and race play a powerful role in how someone is treated by the criminal justice system. Often those with financial

resources are able to hire a team of the best lawyers, who use successful strategies to either drastically minimize a sentence or acquit the individual. Certainly, many have commented, fairly or unfairly, that the wealth of OJ Simpson and Robert Blake resulted in their acquittal.

Baca's work shows what can happen to people who are not from the right side of the tracks. By narrating his own story, Baca clearly chronicles why those who have been marginalized are likely to end up in prison: there are clear racial and social factors that lead some people to be arrested and others let go.¹¹ Perhaps the clearest example of how prejudice influences court decisions can be seen with Baca's arrest and sentencing. Had Baca access to money, he could have hired a competent lawyer. Instead, Baca receives legal counsel from a court appointed lawyer who clearly could care less about him. Reflecting on the lawyer, Baca recalls, "'Plead guilty,' he had said, 'and stop wasting everyone's time.' Nor was he bothered . . . I couldn't read the papers I had signed. I was a negligible nuisance to him" (Place 98). His lawyer is not the only one who has already tried Baca in his mind and found him guilty. At the hearing, Baca thinks,

. . . these officials were not in the business of pardoning poor people. To them, I was a criminal without soul, heart, or feelings. I was sure I was convicted mostly because of who I was, expunged from a society that didn't want people like me in it. (Place 101,102)

Clearly, Baca's class status places him at a disadvantage. His lawyer gives up on him before the trial even begins and the jury follows suit.¹² The injustice of who is sentenced and who is protected is further seen in relation to Baca's brother's rape. Mieyo is abused by two wealthy white men, who know they can victimize him because he lacks social and economic resources to protect himself. The bitter

irony that Baca is sent to prison for a crime he did not commit, while his brother's rapists are free to violate more disadvantaged children is not lost on the reader.

Race, of course, plays an equally powerful role in how individuals are treated by the criminal justice system. George Lipsitz argues, "Unwanted as workers, underfunded as students, and undermined as citizens, minority youth seem wanted only by the criminal justice system" (qtd in Giroux 39). This comment resonates not only with Baca's narrative but with many other marginalized individuals who are labeled deviant. Luis Rodriguez, a former gang member writes, "What to do with those whom society cannot accommodate? Criminalize them. Declare them the enemy, then wage war. Emphasize the differences—the shade of skin, the accent of speech or manner of clothes" (250).

Certainly, Mieyo's attackers are quite aware that their white skin provides them an advantage just as they know that Mieyo's brown skin will harm him if the police are involved. Baca, himself, experiences many situations of injustice due to his skin color. He writes, "I learned about American justice when I was sixteen, chained to a pillar in the basement of the county jail, and in courts where rich kids got off free on the same charges for which brown brothers and sisters are doing time" (Working 95). Baca provides a human face for the audience to understand that not everyone is treated the same by the law. These accounts of injustice are more effective than simply providing legal statistics; they challenge a system that treats the wealthy quite differently from the poor, whites quite differently from non-whites.

Even aside from racist police officers and judges, Baca also shows how racism and stigma can permeate a person's self concept to such an extent that deviance, violence, and law-breaking provide a sense of control, a form of resistance, and space for the individual, as discussed in Chapter One. In essence, many young ethnic teens are "convicted" long before they stand before a judge. Baca movingly shows the pain of being abandoned by his parents, enduring poor treatment in school, and experiencing racial hatred at a young age, leading him to lash out in violence. As easy as it might be for some to dismiss street kids as "garbage," Baca challenges this precept, exposing the complex reality that leads some children to become destructive.

Perhaps one misconception that Baca most clearly negates through his writing is the concept of prison as a country club. Baca delineates the level of abuse that those in power perform over the inmates. H. Bruce Franklin states in *Belly of the Beast* that the observations on prison "demonstrate how our penal institutions force each prisoner to become either a broken, cringing animal, fawning before all authority and power, or a rebel, clinging to human dignity through defiance and violence" (189). Baca effectively chronicles the inhumane treatment other inmates and he experience and the impact it has on their nature. Baca is beaten by the guards, given shock treatments, and unknowingly fed medication until he is lifeless, all in an effort to make him start working again (Working 9). His manner of dealing with torture is through defiance, but not all prisoners are able to do the same. In Nut Run, the psychiatric section of the prison

in which he is placed as punishment for not working, Baca describes prisoners who are beaten down by reputed abuse. He writes of a sadistic guard,

Mad Dog Madril enjoyed scaring the paranoid cons . . . telling them someone was coming to get them, and creating a state of terror in the zombies . . . they were conditioned to submit and would do anything...Mad Dog Madril made them do—drink toilet water, kiss his hands, sometimes even suck his dick through the bars. He ran Nut Run with impunity, a tyrant accountable to no one. (Place 212)

The belief that the prison system is too soft on prisoners today is clearly discredited in Baca's work. While in prison, Baca constantly has to deal with sick, abusive prison personnel, fear rape and beatings from other inmates, and fight to maintain his humanity. Unfortunately, it's not surprising that so many convicts become like Bonafide. By providing graphic details of prison life, Baca forces readers to consider whether prison is a just and productive system.

While the number of people incarcerated continues to rise in the United States, Baca's books may be having a positive impact on prison reforms. Baca has written that many individuals have changed the way they see the corrections system and have promised to work to improve prison conditions after reading his work. Certainly, recent results from a prison study have shown improvements. State prison murder rates have declined by 90%, while suicide, the previous leading cause of death among inmates, has decreased by 60%. Kara Gotsch, coordinator for the ACLU's National Prison Project notes that "one reason for the downward trend is that advocacy groups have become much more aggressive in filing lawsuits to improve conditions behind bars" (qtd in Yost 1). While it is not known if Baca's work directly influenced the change in prison systems, it does reflect Sibley's argument that "a chief means for extending the social

consequences of resistance is...a story of resistance, ...a story that by its telling extends temporally and socially what might otherwise be a discrete or ephemeral victory” (1332). By describing the brutal, soul-destroying world of prison, Baca tells a story that surpasses his own struggles and acts of resistance and extends temporally and socially what might have been his short-lived victory.

Subverting Racial and Class Stereotypes

Baca not only chooses to subvert popular societal misconceptions of prisoners and prisons, he also writes to educate his audience about the damaging stereotypes associated with Chicanos. Describing the men of his barrio, Baca writes, “*Llano* men . . . were rough . . . surviving at the edge with scarce sustenance, caressing the earth with great humility . . .” (Working 26). Baca further reflects on the manner in which Chicanos define themselves as men, saying,

Many times growing up I heard: Conduct yourself like a man. It was not an exhortation to violence, nor did it counsel stoic acceptance of indignities. What was meant was don’t betray those who love you; don’t forget your family and your community; don’t hurt others, cheat or lie; be decent and honorable To be a man is to be loving, to know that your compassion is your strength. (Working 68)

This is a dramatically different portrayal of Chicanos, who are regularly labeled as violent, crude, and lacking sensitivity. Indeed, Baca notes that many of these men are denigrated by society, stating, “These gentle heroes were regarded as ignorant and vicious by those who did not know their hearts . . . [Outsiders] treated these kind men as if they were knife-carrying savages . . .” (Working 33).

By presenting Chicanos in a positive manner, Baca subverts societal stereotypes of men from his culture.

Not only does Baca show that many Chicanos are quite different from how society interpellates them, he also explains why some Chicanos stray from the code of honor Baca discusses above. Men such as his father, whose abusiveness, womanizing, and drinking might normally be seen solely as unsympathetic are portrayed in a humane and complex manner. Baca's depiction of his father demonstrates the factors that leads to his behavior. Although liked by many and even urged to run for public office, Baca's father soon discovers that he is unable to get jobs and support his family. Baca recalls the dreams his father had: "To make us proud of him, he showed us a creased photograph of the governor of New Mexico shaking his hand . . . after sharing good news with us . . . he would returns hours later, drooling drunk and crying remorse" (Place 13). Explaining his father's actions, Baca comments that his father was of the first generation of Chicanos to leave their villages and try to make a place for themselves in society. Unfortunately, the Chicanos of that generation were regularly insulted and mocked and called dirty Mexicans. In order to integrate into society, Chicanos were expected to stop speaking Spanish and to give up their customs. Many experienced irreparable damage from these circumstances and turned to drinking and violence out of utter despair. Similar to his depiction of certain convicts, Baca portrays his father as a man who has done many bad things. However, he also explains the factors that lead Baca's father to lash out at his family.

Like Baca, his father is shaped by negative societal forces. Unlike his son, Baca's father never finds a way to express his pain. Reflecting on the murders of his mother and older brother and the alcoholic early death of his father, Baca writes, "The three most important people in my life, with no linguistic skill to express themselves. They were . . . trying to regain their self-esteem, after being considered too brown, after being raped, after being abandoned. (Place 263) Baca may have shared a similar fate with his father had he not discovered language as a means of exercising his demons and healing his pain.

In many ways, Baca shows the fragility of life, for he is prone to the same violence to which Bonafide and his father are drawn. Had Baca not had the chance to find a means to express his pain, he might very well have become like them. Baca undermines the simplistic American concept of "rugged individualism" where anyone can surmount impossible odds if they only have the right attitude, and, more importantly, those who are not successful have only their weak nature to blame. Baca's father strives to improve himself but soul-damaging racist encounters and internalized prejudice sabotage his efforts. Baca discovers language which allows him to cultivate himself, but he does not accomplish his goals on his own. Factors outside of his control such as support from Harry and other inmates play a crucial role in Baca's development.

Critiquing Elitism in Chicano Culture

While Baca is vocal about the level of racism in the United States, he is also willing to address the hypocrisy present in Chicano culture. Just as Baca

extends an invitation to readers not familiar with Chicano culture to question various assumptions about Latinos, Baca also extends an invitation to individuals from his race to question their own prejudices. Baca shows that it is not only those from the dominant class who oppress but also people from his own marginalized group. For instance, he describes being handcuffed and brutally beaten to the point of unconsciousness by Chicano cops. He states, "In a jail where the cons were ninety-nine percent Chicano, Chicano cops beat me with murderous force, secure in the knowledge that no one would hold them accountable" (Working 91). Class distinction and prejudice are emphasized when Baca argues that the Chicano police officers felt safe beating him because his poverty and lack of social influence make him a prime target. His experience illustrates that just because someone belongs to a marginalized group does not mean that they will not mistreat those who are marginalized.

Baca further illuminates an elitism that is present among some members in the Chicano community. This elitism is similar to what he previously attributes to intolerant members of the dominant culture. He states:

In prison, when I wrote to the G.I. Forum asking for books, they never replied. I wrote to university departments of Chicano Studies—no response. It was the same with LULAC and other organizations Who gave me the encouragement to learn to read and to write? It came from the Chicano *vatos* in prison who gave me books and pencils. (Working 87)

Again, Baca exposes the class dynamic present in how he is perceived. When he turns to the mostly middle class Chicano and Latino organizations for help in educating himself, he is essentially made invisible by their lack of response. The people that support Baca in his desire to become a better man are, in fact, those

that society has already dismissed as ruthless and vicious. Referring to those who do not respond to his requests for help, Baca writes, "I was an embarrassment because I did not fit into their concept of Chicano reality" (Working 87). By writing about these experiences, Baca demonstrates his refusal to be excluded from "dominant" Chicano culture.

Baca further challenges Chicanos who wish to exclude some members of their group in his film *Blood In, Blood Out*. A message of unity and acceptance for *all* Chicanos is at the center of one of the most moving parts of the movie. At the end of the film, two half-brothers go to see the graffiti mural of themselves and their bicultural cousin. Each man has taken a different path in life, symbolizing the various sides of Baca and of Chicano people. Paco, the toughest gangster in the neighborhood, becomes a dedicated police officer; Cruz, the graffiti artist, becomes a successful painter and darling of the white art world, who eventually recovers from heroin addiction. Miklo, in many ways the most gentle of the three, goes to prison where he is transformed into a cold-blooded monster. Viewing the mural, Paco speaks with hatred for Miklo telling Cruz he should "scrape him off the wall like dirt." However, Cruz, the artist and sage, knows that to erase Miklo would be a huge loss, for regardless of what Miklo has become, Paco, Cruz, and Miklo are all connected by the same blood. Cruz implores Paco to understand that this bond of Chicanismo can never be broken, nor should it be. In writing this, Baca appeals to the Chicano community not to pick and choose who should or should not be Latino based on how they "fit" with the ideal many may hold.

Baca has had other volatile situations with Chicanos, who are troubled by his writing. He writes about the Hispanic scholars who attack his book *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*. The scholars believe that “Hispanic writers should present a purely positive image of our people. According to their view, Chicanos never have betrayed each other, we never have fought each other, never sold out; nor have we ever experienced poverty and suffering . . .” (Working 86). While the desire to protect Latinos from negative portrayals is understandable, these scholars seek to gloss over the harsh realities that Baca has experienced. In so doing, whether consciously or not, they attempt to negate his (and others’) experiences. Hanif Kureishi, a Pakistani-British writer, further comments on this phenomenon, which he calls “cheering fictions”:

. . . the writer as public relations officer, as hired liar. If there is to be a serious attempt to understand Britain today, with its mix of races and colours, its hysteria and despair, then, writing about it has to be complex. It can’t apologize or idealize. It can’t sentimentalize and it can’t represent only one group as having a monopoly on virtue. (16)

Kureishi’s views particularly tie in with Baca’s sentiments, for he writes with love for his culture as well with a penetrating awareness that there are issues Chicanos must face to cultivate themselves as a group.

Not everyone, however, considers this a valid viewpoint, as is seen when he receives a letter from a Los Angeles watchdog committee concerned about the portrayal of Chicanos in his screenplay *Blood In, Blood Out*. Similar to the scholars who criticize *Martin*, the watchdog committee suggests that he should portray Latinos in a more positive manner (Working 84). Baca writes a strong response arguing why it is essential to not simplistically portray Latinos as always

virtuous. He states, “Yes, there is violence in the script All of this is an authentic part of our reality, and to deny it is to make us less than what we are . . . we will never overcome our obstacles unless we tell the whole truth . . .”

(Working 88, 89). The scholars who criticize *Martin* and *Blood In, Blood Out* want to erase a part of their culture to create a “clean” image of Chicanos. Yet, in striving to do this, these scholars essentially use a Band-Aid to heal a broken arm. Baca wisely advocates dealing with all aspects of Chicano reality, not solely those that are positive in nature. By explaining why he writes about gangs and violence, Baca argues for the necessity to openly face problems in the Chicano community rather than hide from them. Certainly, Baca has seen the destructiveness that occurs when people try to hide from their pain, as his family did. Baca challenges the concept advocated by some Chicano scholars to put the best foot forward in order to gain respect and acceptance from dominant society. Baca would rather have Chicanos heal their wounds than try to fit a sterilized image of what it means to be Chicano.

Subverting Popular Concepts of the American Dream

Perhaps one of the most explosive topics Baca challenges (for Americans) in *A Place to Stand* is the belief that the United States is the “land of opportunity.” In *Zoot Suit*, El Pachuco tells protagonist Henry Reyna, wrongly convicted of murder due to his race, “This ain’t your country” (Brown 41). El Pachuco’s sentiments capture how many marginalized individuals in the United States feel. In *Gang Nation*, Monica Brown argues that Latino narratives challenge dominant

society to “explore what patriotism and justice signified for Mexican-American youth cast as enemies of the state . . .” (38). She further comments, “The literature reflecting gang experience in America calls on readers to witness the way the American Dream does and does not signify for certain groups of urban youth” (78). The narratives underscore that despite American citizenship, Chicanos are excluded from US culture. (Brown 63) Certainly, Baca has never felt that he is part of the United States. He states, “I have no real sense of participation in the national identity of this country, no sense that I am represented” (Working 95). Baca’s feelings mirror others who have been stigmatized.

By writing about marginal experiences, Baca openly challenges a cornerstone of American history: the belief that each person has the right to the preservation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Baca describes an America in which this part of the Declaration of Independence is most definitely not self-evident for all people. He writes:

I realized that America is two countries: a country of the poor and deprived, and a country of those who had a chance to make something of their lives. Two societies, two ways of living Most Americans remain ignorant of this . . . that they live in a country that holds hostage behind bars another populous country of their fellow citizens. (Working 18)

The American Dream sounds promising to many Americans, but as Brown, Baca, and El Pachuco note, the American Dream is not granted to all who have US citizenship. Baca’s statements on the United States challenge the hegemony that claims all Americans can achieve their dreams if they only work hard enough. Baca presents an alternative view of the American Dream, one where many are dismissed and/or denigrated. Indeed, Luis Rodriguez states of those marginalized,

Conclusion

Baca's marginalized status leads him to question many of the inequitable situations presented in his bildungsroman-narrative. By challenging simplistic labeling of prisoners and showing the bias inherent in the criminal justice system, Baca paints a complex picture of the racism, classism, and stigma that determine many inmates' experiences. Baca further subverts common stereotypes of Chicano men, underscoring their gentle, kind, and compassionate nature. Perhaps, even more significantly, Baca provides insight as to why some Chicanos behave violently. Men, such as his father, turn to drinking and violence as a means of coping with racial intolerance and internalized prejudice. Baca's father is never portrayed in an attractive manner, but the complex depiction of his father undermines the concept that he is born "bad." Moreover, Baca challenges the popular notion of "rugged individualism," in which anyone can make it if she only tries hard enough. Baca shows that outside factors such as prejudice strongly affect someone's ability to achieve. Furthermore, in many cases, even when a person is successful, it is based to a large degree on the people who have provided guidance and support to the individual.

Baca not only confronts dominant society, he further challenges members of the Chicano community who wish to exclude certain Chicanos. Baca urges people from his group to show respect, unity, and support for all members. He argues for the need to not present a sterilized, false image as a means of gaining

acceptance from dominant society. Most importantly, he advocates dealing with troubling issues in the community in an open and honest manner so that the community can develop as a whole.

Baca lastly issues a challenge to those who believe that the American Dream is available to all citizens. His narrative clearly shows the impact marginalization has on people. Excluding, dismissing, and alienating those who are deemed inferior is presented in a deeply painful manner in Baca's work.

Conclusion

Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand* is a beautifully written text that provides challenging insights to the reader. Baca's work should be studied for a variety of reasons. His voice, long dismissed and denigrated, speaks of dominant society in a manner many readers might not have previously considered.

Nourished at a young age to lash out and destroy, Baca has devoted himself to creating and contributing to Chicano literature, *bildung*, and the society and as a whole.

Baca's work contributes significantly to the field of Chicano Studies. His poignant depiction of external racism shows the damaging impact prejudice can have on an individual's sense of self. More importantly, Baca reveals that rampant bigotry not only undermines a person's self-esteem, it influences behavior in a negative manner. Perhaps even more noteworthy, Baca's detailed chronicle of his own battle with internalized racism and self-hatred not only reinforces the realization of how destructive racism is, it provides a means for countering the perniciousness of this prejudice. By depicting his initial negative self-concept in an open and candid manner, Baca presents internalized racism not as a shameful secret no person from a marginalized group should feel but a logical result of living in an intolerant society. Most significantly, Baca presents internalized racism as part of a process not an end result. As Stuart Hall notes, identity is always in the act of becoming. By tracing his change from cultural shame to

cultural awareness and pride, Baca demonstrates that individuals are capable of evolving beyond how society defines them.

Baca also acts as sage for the Chicano community, by arguing for the necessity of developing unity among all Chicanos. Rather than exclude some Latinos because they have been incarcerated or behaved violently, Baca urges the community to embrace all members of the group. He advocates striving to understand the complex factors that may lead some Latinos to lash out against society. Baca further urges Chicanos to build a strong group *bildung* by looking inward and reflecting on the issues that harm Chicano society. Honestly accessing problems in the Latino community will allow Chicanos to cultivate themselves. Just as self-cultivation allows Baca to turn outward and become society-centered through his writing and activism, Chicano group-cultivation could allow Latinos to turn outward and actively fight racism, classism, and prejudice. In essence, Chicanos could perform the code of honor Baca discusses in regards to his grandfather, building inner and group esteem. In this manner, regardless of whether dominant society acknowledges and validates Chicano *bildung* or not, Latinos can cultivate a group inner esteem that will provide them strength, self- and group-expression, and wisdom.

Baca also contributes to the field of literature. His innovative writing style, stunning prose, and moving storytelling insure him a respected place in U.S. Letters. Baca's talented work places him on the level of writers in the canon. Baca, however, may offer readers a voice that differs from those traditionally canonized in literature. His experiences and more importantly, his ability to

“break through” add an important voice to the field of literary study. Indeed, in this conflicted time, Baca’s depiction of the ugly side of life provides those inside and outside the academy the opportunity to discuss and reflect on his many insights. Moreover, Baca’s work is also unique and refreshing; *A Place to Stand* is a case in point. By taking the bildungsroman, a spiritual, individualistic European literary tradition and inserting experiences of marginalization, Baca adds to and diverges from this genre. His use of testimonial narrative to subvert social injustices further contributes to the bildungsroman, by taking the story of one person’s development and transforming it into a story of self-cultivation and social transgression.

A Place to Stand chronicles Baca’s quest for self-cultivation in a moving, realistic manner. Baca’s struggles with deviance and a desire to lash out in violence are tamed as he develops as a writer. Significantly, Baca notices the impact language has not only on his life but on those around him. Bonafide’s rage, his father’s death from alcoholism, and his brother’s and mother’s drug addiction all result from an inability to express themselves, preventing them from exorcising their demons and rebuilding their lives. Through language, Baca is able to become a man that he admires and respects, regardless of how others in society may perceive him. In essence, language saves Baca’s life, a sentiment with which Baca would wholeheartedly agree. Baca chooses to share the gift of language with other prisoners as well through his literacy programs, so that they may have other options available to them aside from deviance and violence.

Perhaps, most importantly, through subversive anecdotes, Baca encourages people to use self- and societal-reflection to challenge unjust circumstances. Baca asks his audience to consider a vibrant, complex, and dynamic reality which can rarely be easily or rigidly defined. In Baca's world, a poor, troubled, and violent street kid, labeled as a deviant and criminal at an early age, can also be a poet, a good friend, and a compassionate human being. In asking the reader to challenge the often unquestioned societal perception of people living on the margins, Baca ultimately provides readers with the opportunity to cultivate and strengthen their own humanity.

A Place to Stand may also reflect the conflicted bildung of the United States. Where previously, Chicanos of Baca's father's generation encountered the Melting Pot, a cruel, soul-destroying era in American history, the United States now struggles to define itself. While there are many that would gladly erase the Baca's from the canon, others hunger to hear the multitude of voices that comprise America. Baca's respected and award-winning prose, then, poses a challenge for the United States, and perhaps other countries who are experiencing similar growing pains: cultivate the nation's bildung and enlarge the national symbolic.

Endnotes

1. One such example of an outsider writing a successful subversive text is seen in "Chain Gang Narratives and the Politics of 'Speaking For.'" Jeanne Perreault discusses John Spivak's *Georgia Nigger*. Spivak, a successful, educated white Northerner, chronicled the abusive, horrific conditions of the Georgia chain gangs, which was composed of mainly poor, black, uneducated men. Spivak's book had a huge impact on many. "To me it seems we stand indicted as a people before the world," Georgia Governor Hugh Dorsey publicly stated, and if no change occurs "both man and God would justly condemn Georgia" (Spivak Papers). Although Spivak does not belong to the same class, race, or region as the men he "speaks for", Spivak is able to construct an effective subversive text. Moreover, Taylor Hackford, the director and producer of Baca's screenplay *Blood In, Blood Out* is an Anglo American who spent a significant amount of time with Chicanos while growing up. Many of Hackford's movies deal with marginalized groups or individuals in a way that challenges hegemony.
2. Baca was sent to prison for 6 years for selling heroin to an undercover officer who was shot and killed by one of Baca's friends during the arrest. In actuality, Baca did sell marijuana for a period of time but never sold heroine. Baca was given the strictest sentence possible by the judge.
3. Many Chicanos were humiliated and punished for speaking Spanish in school. This naturally created a feeling of being foreign and an outsider.
4. While Goffman's views are valuable indeed, some of his language is outdated. The word "bravado" has a problematic connotation to it.
5. Maslow established a hierarchy of needs such as physiological, security, belonging, esteem, and finally self actualization. He believed that an individual needed to have a specific need met in order to progress to the next stage of growth. In Baca's case, however, he was able to develop esteem needs even though his security needs were never truly met in prison (several times while in prison, contracts were put out on Baca's life). Thus, although Maslow's needs offer a great deal of insight into Baca's (and others) situations, the hierarchical aspect of Maslow's theory is not a part of Baca's self evolution.
6. One hole in Maslow's theory is the belief that attaining desired needs facilitates to growth on the part of the individual. Dependence on receiving lower needs, not

simply being denied those needs, can result in reinforcing negative behavior. Receiving protection, acceptance and lower self esteem needs because of his violent behavior could have reinforced Baca's desire to behave brutally.

7. Baca's father was indeed a violent man. Although Baca noted his father's destructive actions, he strongly held rampant racism as the culprit for his desire to lash out at his family.

8. Susan Bordo also examines hysterics and anorexics in a similar manner in her study. One criticism is that she focuses primarily on middle class women. A working class woman, for instance, could most likely not afford to remain solely in the home. The need to earn a living would be too great.

9. This is a common view held by many sociologists. The process of mortification depicted by Goffman or criminalization leads the inmate to identify solely as a criminal. Foucault noted that prison became a school for criminals, where inmates could exchange information on how to be more successful at crime.

10. While in prison, Baca was regularly called by the number 32581--never his name--by those in power while he was expected to refer to them as "sir."

¹¹ In *Gang Nation*, Monica Brown notes that "the prison rate in various states and regions is not all determined by crime rate but strictly by the size of the non-white population. Areas with very low crime rates and very high Black populations (Mississippi, for example) have very high rates of imprisonment" (181).

¹² With a skilled lawyer, who naturally would require a fee to retain his services, there is a strong possibility Baca would have been acquitted or at least received a reduced sentence. There were many holes in his case. In fact, a white informant, the person guilty of selling heroin, claimed that Baca and a friend were the culprits. With proper legal representation, Baca most likely would have had a lawyer that would have listened to his story and sought to defend him in an effective manner.

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[ap_on_re_us/prisons_death_rates](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20050821/ap_on_re_us/prisons_death_rates)>.

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